

A FORGOTTEN DEBT.

Translated from the French
of Leon de Tinseau.

By FLORENCE BELKNAP GILMOUR.

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In Quest of the Ideal

A NOVEL

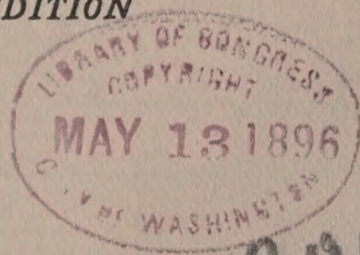
TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH OF
LÉON DE TINSEAU

BY

Florence Belknap Gilmour

TRANSLATOR OF "A FORGOTTEN DEBT," "IN NORWAY,"
AND "THE DAMASCUS ROAD"

AUTHORIZED EDITION



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Madame

En vous conférant le droit exclusif et pour tous les pays de traduire en Anglais : "Vers l'Idéal", je ne me dissimule pas que tout l'avantage est de mon côté ; car c'est une rare bonne fortune, pour un écrivain de ma langue, de voir son œuvre confiée à vos mains habiles et délicates. De plus célèbres que moi - nous pourrions les nommer - n'ont pas eu la même chance et m'envient le talent, la conscience de ma traductrice. Ceux là devraient encore plus m'envier son indulgente amitié.

Coutefois, madame, vous pensez trop et trop bien pour vous contenter du rôle d'interprète de la pensée d'un autre. Ceux qui ont lu vos traductions : "The Damascus Road", "A Forgotten Debt", ceux qui vont lire celle-ci, attendent que vous leur serviez votre œuvre..

Vous n'aurez pas de lecteur plus fidèle, comme vous n'avez pas d'ami plus reconnaissant et plus dévoué que

vos respectueux serviteurs

L. J. Bureau

26 Décembre 1895.

In Quest of the Ideal.

CHAPTER I.

MY château—the château of my dreams, I mean—is not easy to discover in the solitary valley which shelters it. Do not imagine, however, that it is at the antipodes, beneath the pine-trees of Landes, or among the dolmens of a Breton desert. Indeed, as soon as October strips the poplars that border the Marne of their leaves, from its Mansarde-roof at night can be seen the tricoloured lights of the Eiffel Tower.

In a secluded spot, rarely visited, stands the dwelling equidistant from the two railroads which lead, one to Meaux, the other to Provins. In order to find it you must know that it is nestled behind a clump of trees, for it is as large, perhaps a trifle larger than a notary's one-story house. It has, however, a turret which does its best to reflect in the river the few battlements which have been preserved, but, alas! the mirror

is too small. The other end of the dwelling is remarkable for its ogive porch, which would be majestic did it not provoke a laugh: it is an entrance which leads—nowhere. It might be compared to the useless sleeve of an amputated arm.

In happier times it was used as a gate to the Court of Honor, which formed a complete quadrangle. Of these four sides there is but one remaining, or rather the half of one, and it is this picturesque relic which constitutes my *château*. How fortunate, was it not, that the troops of Henri IV. demolished the rest! It would now be impossible to impoverish oneself in its restoration, even though one were rich. A few days of labor for the tiler to restore the brown tiles, two bags of cement to mend the walls, a barrel of white lead to repair the shutters and doors, not forgetting the five hundred yards of fencing, and behold, for some ten years the habitation is rendered as good as new. You are requested not to expect fine views and long perspectives. The ten acres of meadow which surround it is as flat as your hand, the river is so still that you must watch a long time the sleeping foliage above the emerald green of its waters in order to discover the direction of its current. But what could be brighter and more seductive than this charming morsel of an old castle, with its ivy, its wisteria, the velvet lawns always fresh, the pigeons strutting about in its eaves, the business-like grovel-

ling of the foreign ducks, and the sleeping spaniel before the porch, from which can be perceived a background of a wooded hill? And the châtelaine of my château!—did you at this moment see her emerge from the house to gather flowers beneath her parasol and dressed in her fresh pink peignoir, you would forget the lack of scenery. Alas! my château is not mine.

On a beautiful September day, two years ago, a sub-lieutenant of dragoons in undress uniform stopped his horse at the turn of a road before an open gate. His cap on the back of his head, his cigar in one corner of his mouth, the handle of his whip tucked under his arm, he was studying the map which he had taken care to put in his pocket.

“It is not easy to discover the location,” he muttered, “but may the devil take me if I have not found it. It is strange; I should have thought that a rich fellow would have had more imposing surroundings.”

He refolded his map, and with a word to his horse, its hoofs were soon tramping the gravel of a carefully-kept avenue. On the threshold of a kitchen, amidst shining utensils, was seen the divinity of the place, imposing in her spotless white apron.

“Is this Mûrier, the residence of Monsieur Adrien La Houssaye?” asked the young man.

"Yes, sir. Will you come in? My master is at table."

"Still at table at two o'clock? Of course, then, he has company."

"No, sir; but he has been hunting, and when he is at a hunt——"

"Heaven knows when he will return, hey?"

A nice-looking valet with napkin in hand appeared on the top step. He hailed a stable-boy, who took charge of the visitor's horse. The officer was at once ushered into the dining-room, which opened on the opposite façade. At an ebony table, upon which shone some superb pieces of silver-ware, a man of about thirty, tall, robust, muscular, and slender, was reading a sporting journal. The officer entered with extended hand. Adrien La Houssaye seemed to hesitate.

"Of course you do not recognize me," said the visitor; "when you saw me last in Brittany I was preparing for Saint Cyr. It was at a public meeting, and we stared at each other like two Kilkenny cats."

"Yes, I do remember it very well. You were with your father. And so this is what has become of the little Fernand de Louarn in four years?" La Houssaye's grasp seemed to swallow up the delicate, nervous hand of the dragoon.

"I hope that you have not breakfasted."

"Yes, at mess, and I have had time to ride

through Brie * before I discovered Mûrier and its owner—or tenant.”

“You were right, I am lord of the manor. Then, of course, you are stationed at Meaux, near us?”

“Yes, for the last three weeks. In paying my list of visits to the various châtelains, I have begun with you. I can now make the declaration which the awe of former days kept silent on my lips: I like you, Monsieur La Houssaye. Will you permit me to add that I admire you?”

“By no means, and furthermore I do not allow you to call me monsieur. Do you wish to convince me that I am an old man? It is true that I am thirty years of age!”

Instead of laughing Adrien feigned a sigh, but added in a serious tone,—

“As regards our friendship, that is understood. Your father—in past days—overwhelmed me with kindnesses.”

“My dear La Houssaye,” said the lieutenant, “let us begin by being frank. What took place between my father and you? It is not at Stanislas College, neither at Saint Cyr nor Saumur, that one learns family history. I realised that there was a coldness, but never asked for details, and, as you had left the province——”

* Brie, a small county of France near Paris.

“Electoral coldness, nothing else. My father had formerly supported yours in his elections, who at that time was a Monarchist. We had a thousand workmen employed in our factory in Brittany, and were influential in securing votes. But there have been many changes. My father is dead; your father, Pierre de Louarn, has become a *rallié*.* I, who never cared for trade, have passed the business over to a joint-stock company, in order that I may follow my tastes, which certainly have no business turn. Be that as it may, your father saw me conceding to others the influence which I have been able to preserve in Brittany. I am not a *rallié*, and Pierre de Louarn not having been happy in his electioneering campaign, his resentment has been the more bitter. What is he doing? Where is he, and how is it with him? At heart, you know, I regret this semi-quarrel. Politics, as things go, ought to unite rather than estrange people, whose bodies may be riddled with shot at the same time some day.”

“That is my opinion; all the same, it is strange that you should remain Royalist, while my father—— In short, it is he who gave me your address, advised me to come and see you, and be guided a good deal by you. So the

* *Rallié* implies a person who has renounced his original political conviction and has gone over to the opposition.

estrangement is not very deep, I imagine,—certainly it is not irremediable.”

“And above all,” said Adrien, with that very gentle smile which ordinarily accompanies physical force, “it will not extend to the second generation. And now what will you drink? There is only water on the table, a mania of mine; but the Mûrier possesses a good cellar, which is always at the disposal of friends.”

After some overflowing glasses of old Madeira,—genuine, oh, gourmets!—Fernand de Louarn was invited to visit the habitation, which was fertile in surprises, for this dwelling, reduced to suit a modest income, was manifestly fitted up and appointed by a millionaire. This does not mean that the pieces of furniture were numerous, or that the walls disappeared beneath pictures and tapestry. On the contrary, the general aspect was cold, and, for French tastes, a little bare. Any article that was useless was rare, but the smallest object, from the boot-jack in the dressing-room to the fine cut glass from which the young anchorite drank water, was a perfection in its kind. As for pictures, in the salon there were only the portraits of Adrien’s father and mother; but they were the work of Bonnat. The piano was an Erard, and the arm-chairs were the perfection of comfort. Who does not know the salons of some Cræsus in which it is impossible to sit for any length of time without feeling

pains in the back? In the gun-rack there were only two guns; each of them cost sixty guineas at Purdie's, in London. The stable, as simple as a barn, contained only three horses,—an incomparable Irish hunter and two ponies, the possession of which all the amateurs of the Bois would compete for if to-morrow they were put up for sale.

The cook prepared but one dish when Adrien was alone, a frequent occurrence, but the mere salmis made by her were poems. The idle hours of the good woman were not as many as might be supposed, for her orders were to give bread to every beggar who knocked at the kitchen door and to carry bouillon to the sick neighbours, to which were added some silver pieces, and if the family became numerous these were changed into gold. To-day it is the mistress of the house herself who performs this duty. Fernand observed everything, but said little to his host. As he made the tour of the garden, which covered an acre, he discovered a statue of "Our Lady of Lourdes," in a sort of oratory formed of bushes of gigantic box.

"And now," said he, looking at the owner, "is it by chance that you have become a saint,—water on the table, not the smallest photograph of a woman in the salon or bedrooms, a Holy Virgin within the grove?"

"You canonise men too early, my officer,—you

must lower your high opinion a little. I do not like wine. My hunts, my horse, my travels, and my bicycle leave me no time to collect photographs of women. As to the statue, that has its history, which I will tell you. Now, as we are going back to the house, you shall have a good arm-chair, and, I trust, a good cigar, which will help you to find the story less tedious."

This programme carried out, La Houssaye took up the thread of conversation.

"I am so far from being a saint that, after my father's death, I commenced life by causing the death of a man."

"I know it," said Fernand. "How I envied you at that time! I was then in my preparatory class, and I saw in you the typical hero of romance."

"There was nothing to envy in me, my friend. A thrill still goes through me when I remember what I experienced in the streets of Nantes when I came across the father or mother of this poor devil, fool enough to kill himself at the house of this miserable creature, who had forsaken him for my money. Already at that time I intended to give up business, which bored me; moreover, since your great philosophers of to-day consider employers as malefactors, I have had quite enough of it. After this miserable adventure I hated Bretagne, and longed for a taste of Paris life; but having drifted into an idler I was insufferably

ennuyé. Since a certain shot from a revolver, I have experienced when at the side of one of those women who serve to distract imbeciles slight shivers which are anything but voluptuous."

"You have a woebegone look," remarked Fernand. "I am sure you would not invite the commander's ghost to have a glass of champagne with you."

"Oh, my friend, do not expect to find in me the stuff that Don Juan is made of. All the same, there is something good to be found in Paris. I love music and the theatre, as well as society, for a week from time to time. I immediately understood what I needed. A small house two hours from the boulevard, and a *pied-à-terre* in the city, where I could leave a dress suit and white ties, which I do not wear much. About this time a young man, who had succeeded in running through his fortune, was trying to sell the last slice,—this small place where I am living. We soon came to terms. I accepted his price and the condition imposed by himself, of respecting his Holy Virgin, which in no wise displeased me."

"That is a peculiar type of young man who runs through his fortune and imposes such a condition."

"Yes, is he not! And I must tell you that this prodigal son is a priest, such as we meet but seldom, too seldom. His father, a retired captain

of the navy, left him with comfortable means. He ventured into society, and I fancy he has been bitten in the heart by some sorrow. He abandoned everything for the seminary. Besides, he has the soul of an apostle. After he had donned the cassock he went, at his bishop's request, to found a parish in a country of miscreants at the other end of the diocese. He built a church, a presbytery, and a school with his money. Out of his small fortune there remain some heavy debts and the statue, before which his mother used to pray for the return of the mariner. You see that it is not I who am the saint. During your manœuvres, if you should ever pass La Mornière, between Château-Landon and Souppes, go to see the curé, Abbé Esminjeaud. He is one of the most interesting men that I know, apart from his saintliness. And if he should preach do not fail to listen to his sermon; you will hear true eloquence."

"My dear La Houssaye," said the officer, "will you allow me to add that my admiration has increased? You are either the greatest sage of the nineteenth century, or you are a frightful niggard; but a niggard does not give such cigars to his friends. Had I your fortune—two millions, according to report—I would have a château, a large stable, kennel whippers-in, a train of domestics,—in one word, everything which encumbers life, even to some debts. How much hap-

pier you are! Who has taught you this great philosophy?"

"I have looked around me and I have seen none but people who were poor,—that is to say, they had no *pin-money*. Pin-money, my friend, is the only thing which renders life worth living, for the rest does not count. I have a dozen neighbours who overpower me with their luxury. I do not feel any the worse for it, as you see. But if I should suggest travelling,—which is one of my manias,—they would bring forth twenty reasons for not budging from their homes. The true reason I know well. A loss at cards or at races; a wing to be built to the château, or furniture to be remade; a little mistress, who is too greedy; a box taken at the opera. But for the château, the club, the stables, and mademoiselle, all these people would be as enchanted as I to have a winter in India with the tigers, or a summer in Norway on a good yacht with the salmon. And above all they would not fall into this fault, so full of danger in our days, that of exasperating the poor by a needless display of luxury."

"That is what my father says," observed Fernand de Louarn; "you know that the social question is his hobby."

"Oh, I agree with your father on many points. How is he getting on with his social question? Never going to Brittany, I have not seen him for a century."

“Well,” said the officer, picking up his cap and whip, “I hope that you will see him ere long. He is coming to inspect my quarters. At the barracks politics are ignored, and I should feel great pleasure in seeing your hand once again clasping my father’s.”

“That will not be a less pleasure for me. Moreover, we are going ahead so quickly that the perspective of ideas is becoming modified. To speak frankly, mine get entangled, and, if your father with his Christian Socialism could disentangle them,—but, as they say at Leipsic, ‘*Gaudiamus igitur dum juvenes sumus!*’ What day will you breakfast with me? Afterwards we will harness the ponies and pay court to my neighbour,—‘la belle Madame Montgodfroy.’”

“The banker’s wife?”

“And the châtelaine of Saint Urbain. She will turn your head, for, as you are a very young man, I suppose you are not afraid of Junos of forty years.”

“Oh, I? Juno, Diana, Venus, all suit me provided the goddess be pretty.”

“All right. I see you would still be on Mount Ida studying the trial of the famous combat if you had been in the place of Paris.”

CHAPTER II.

EIGHT days later, as agreed, the two young men were again conversing together in the salon of Mûrier, after a breakfast less simple than Adrien La Houssaye usually took. Their first reserve soon disappeared. The lieutenant's admiration for his friend had in no wise diminished since he had known more of him, and nothing is easier than to know a man who is always quite ready to let his life be seen, in which nothing is hidden, and where there is neither pose, ambition, nor any serious fault.

"Well," said the host, glancing at the clock, "are we ready?"

"We are ready," said young Louarn, smiling. "We have drunk *my* coffee, we have smoked *my* cigar, and we have finished sipping *my* Chartreuse verte. At first your hospitality was a little depressing, but you see that I have become used to it. Swear that you do not despise a guest who possesses all the weaknesses of which you are ignorant."

"You are right, and I am wrong. It is the weaknesses of a nation which constitute the ground for taxation. If, last year, all our coun-

trymen had been compelled to drink clear water and had tabooed tobacco, it would have been necessary to send the dragoons to their homes, which would have deprived Madame Montgodfroy of a charming visit."

When they were on their way the two friends naturally continued to talk of the châtelaine of Saint Urbain.

"I have noticed," said Fernand, "that she is not very popular with my comrades; they seldom go there."

"It is she who seldom invites them. She says that officers are too conspicuous. She is a clever woman in so far as compromising herself is concerned."

"Indeed, at mess when her name is mentioned winks are exchanged, but there is no tangible story. Now, I assure you that the dragoons' mess-room is the ground *par excellence* for tangible stories. 'La belle Martha,' as we call her, is considered as being infinitely spirituelle and as the best-shaped woman in Paris."

"Yes," said Adrien, "as much as one can see, which, on certain occasions, is a great deal, gives one a fine idea of her form. As for her mind, I believe it is less substantial than her body. But she possesses one quality unknown to the Parisians, a quality which never fails to procure, even to a simpleton, the reputation of being a witty woman. She listens to people.

For us, the most spirituelle woman is not the best talker,—it is the one who will let us do the talking. That is why I like foreigners, who evince this politeness, as well as many others.”

“But look here; ‘la belle Martha’ must have some defect, after all?”

“Do you suppose that I pass my time in observing her? But, indeed, every one sees that she is consumed with the modern evil,—the need of novelty, the pursuit of ideas.”

“Do you see any great harm in it?”

“I see at least a danger. This hungering for the unknown in women makes me anxious, because they nearly always concrete the idea in the man. For them to embrace an idea too often means to embrace a man.”

“That is good,” said Adrien. “What new idea could I propose for the ‘belle Martha’ to embrace?”

“Forsooth! you would be compelled to hunt a little. My neighbour is an aristocrat, an Imperialist by birth, being the daughter of Count de Renuzart, an ex-chamberlain. After four or five years of starvation due to the misfortunes of the dynasty, this young woman, mismated, turned Republican, after Gambetta had dined several times at her house, so it was said. Since this illustrious friendship she has retained the habit, rather fatiguing for others, of inveighing against everything. She railed successively, according

to history, against the 'Seize Mai,' against the avariciousness of a president, against Panama, against the Jews, and each one of these harangues coincided with the advent of a new man on the scene. Five years ago, when I came to Mûrier, she was in with Boulangism."

"Oh, ho! the general had—dined?"

"Not he, but one of his partisans, a shrewd fellow who understood how to fish for the disdained sirens in the watery furrows made by the vessel. When the vessel was lost on the rocks she forgot politics for the last novelty in art, Wagnerism, impressionism, decadentism, pessimism, symbolism,—all the isms known have defiled before my eyes, personified either by a composer, a painter, a poet, or—a simple humbug. There was a 'Merovingienne,'—that is to say, a long-haired period. Now prepare yourself to make acquaintance with the premature baldness and the collectivist ideas of the apostle Thomassin."

"What! Is collectivism to be found at Montgodfroy's? This millionaire harbours the serpent in his bosom?"

"Oh, rather in the bosom of his wife. But he has seen so many animals of all sorts nestled, and above all refreshed, that he no longer pays attention to this menagerie,—like the father whose offspring raise lizards after being disgusted with silkworms. On the contrary, there is some one who seems to me to suffer, and that

is my little friend Louise, the daughter of the house. She has occasionally a manner of looking at her mother that makes one unhappy. By the bye, one rarely sees her; it is such a nuisance to talk on the topics of the day before a young girl."

They entered an avenue bordered by lamp-posts, ending at some distance in an irreproachable edifice, but in its correct elegance quite commonplace, and resembling too much the town-halls of large cities. Alleys white as roads were still wet from the hose. A park laid out in the form of a square was as carefully tended as any public park. It was surprising to find the benches empty and not the usual gathering of children, nurses, and soldiers. The iron plates, to which the water-pipes were fixed for the purpose of irrigation, took the place of mole-hills on the beautiful lawns. The idea of a mole-hill at Saint Urbain! As well introduce a navy at a garden-party. Broad asphalt sidewalks extended around the house; the windows, which were of a single pane of glass, displayed the heavy silk hangings within.

It was easy to see that when Honoré Montgodfroy built this residence a little before the war he was inspired by the quite new splendours of Parc Monceau and the palaces which surround it. Such were the great seigneurs of yore, who, on their estates, copied a portion of the palace and

park of Versailles. It is easier, by the way, to copy Monsieur Haussmann than Louis XIV., and risks no danger of disgrace to the Fouquets of to-day. May God protect their descendants against some rancours less royal! However, the architect of Saint Urbain, a clever man if not a genius, had the happy modesty of copying for Montgodfroy the celebrated hall of a neighbouring château recently inaugurated by an Imperial visit. The enormous room was deserted when the two friends entered. The light coming from the ceiling showed an amusing variety and collection of things, for each one of the corners of this cathedral of worldly worship, where the chimney-piece replaced the choir, was like a chapel destined for some special rite. One might choose between the musical corner, with its concert grand piano, or the reading corner, with its shelves of books, the table each morning loaded with papers and periodicals. There was also the corner for games, the Dutch billiard-table with its green cloth, even to roulette. Finally, there was the cosy corner for conversation, with its downy couches and arm-chairs, and the embroidery in its frame, wherein for an entire season the figures of an idyllic scene were fading, destined, no doubt, like many idyls commenced in the same place, to remain only in outline. The walls were covered with pictures,—all modern, all costly. Some, to tell the truth, made one

feel the vertigo of madness; but from this collection could be studied the decadence of French painting within the last fifty years. As Fernand de Louarn repressed an exclamation of horror at the sight of certain works of art in this museum, his companion said to him in a low voice:

“Did I not forewarn you? Bring your philosophy to bear, for you will see worse than that of other kinds. But is it not amusing to discover that the excommunicants of times gone by, the Courbets, the Manets, which form the starting-point of this gallery, now give the impression of being archaic and regular when compared to their descendants? Between ourselves the stream runs quickly, and the devil of it is that it is not only the daubs which are carried away by the tide.”

“What!” said the dragoon, “you are a pessimist? In that I admire you less.”

“Oh, it is not my natural state; but I cannot enter the houses of these great lords of wealth without trembling. In such places one feels better than elsewhere the pressure of high waters, which sweep away everything, even great trunks of trees, towards the abyss.”

From a sort of tribune which ran around the hall and opened on the apartments of the first floor above, a voice, a little dry in its precision, was heard, “Do not be impatient; I am coming down.”

Two minutes later Martha Montgodfroy held out her hand without much effusion to her "neighbour," as she deigned to call him. Fernand de Louarn, duly presented, bowed, and all three seated themselves near the chimney-place on solemn-looking arm-chairs of the fourteenth century, consecrated to the visits of ceremony. The usual conversation in such cases commenced. Was the new-comer satisfied with his garrison? Was he comfortably lodged? Did he not appreciate his proximity to Paris? Was he fond of hunting? The same questions might have been asked of any of the sub-lieutenants at Meaux had they been in Fernand de Louarn's place. He submitted, however, to the commonplace interview, and with his tranquil Breton eyes examined Madame Montgodfroy without experiencing the agitation which she was accustomed to see in very young men in her presence.

Owing to the excess of femininity which emanated from her personality, and was perceptible in every attitude and in her smallest gesture, Martha Montgodfroy was destined to agitate many. Not that there was anything suggestive in her way of dressing or in her behaviour. But those lines which so eloquently appeal to the imagination had been preserved in her, and had not fallen into excess, which threatens women in their fortieth year.

And as she seated herself in a *fauteuil à la*

Maintenon, which perfectly suited her tall form, no one could have said that she had not remained a "grande dame," every inch a Renuzart in spite of all the Montgodfroys in the world. From the tips of her English boots to the high collar of her plain tailor gown, there was not one point which displeased the eye, neither in the discreet folds of her dress nor in the proportions of her figure, the outlines of which could be plainly seen beneath the skirt, nor even in her casual pose. While looking at her it was impossible to forget that she was said to be the best-shaped woman in Paris, and a connoisseur would have given the same praise to her dress.

In revenge, even the flatterers never pretended that the châtelaine of Saint Urbain was pretty. One could think that nature, satisfied with her work, did not intend that the face should divert the looks from the admiration due the rest of the body. But the head was small, and those who have observed much know that a woman is never ugly when her head is below average size. The grey eyes, overshadowed by broad eyebrows which threw a warm tint in them, never ceased to ask the eternal question which the feminine sphinx addresses to masculine sensuality; but they posed it coldly, being sure, one felt it, of the reply which they will make. The mouth, however, was large, mordant, with thin lips, which furnished a supreme argu-

ment to men who had been repulsed, that Martha Montgodfroy was void of passion. What did they know about it? But let us believe these would-be "feminists" that full lips are the infallible symptom and necessary accompaniment of a voluptuous nature.

After a few moments the châtelaine seemed anxious to know why the young dragoon had chosen to be presented by Adrien La Houssaye. "It is not that you could have selected a more worthy introducer," she added, quickly, observing a smile on her neighbour's face. "But the hermit of Mûrier does not ordinarily inconvenience himself for trifles."

"Oh, madame," replied Adrien, "it is not a trifle to gratify the desire of a friend, and Fernand de Louarn is both my friend and compatriot."

At the name of Louarn, which at first she had heard only indistinctly, "la belle Martha" appeared suddenly to be roused.

"What!" she cried, "can you be the son of the celebrated Christian Socialist?"

"I have never heard my father giving himself that title," said the young man, flushing. "Christian he is most certainly, which is not surprising since he is a Breton, but the word Socialist is complicated, and the term not complimentary."

It was not Madame Montgodfroy's wish to

broach complicated questions in a first interview, so she quickly changed the conversation.

"Your father will be charmed to hear that his son is chaperoned by the most—reasonable of mentors. Mûrier is quiet, restful, and calming, is it not?" There was a vein of sarcasm in the employment of these adjectives, and Adrien replied,—

"No doubt that is why Lieutenant de Louarn was longing to become acquainted with Saint Urbain, which has not the reputation of being either 'quiet, restful, or calming.'"

"If you please, monsieur," said the châtelaine, turning towards the officer, "we will admit provisionally that we are wildly giddy here. For the moment Saint Urbain does seem mortally *ennuyeux*, so you are forced to take your friend's word for it; but we will try to show it you beneath a less gloomy light. Come and dine on Sunday; you will meet my uncle, the Marquis de Villegarde, and some of these Parisians such as the English term from Saturday-to-Mondayists, among them my husband. Of course the invitation is extended to Monsieur La Hous-saye."

With a ceremonious bow Adrien accepted. Fernand rubbing his ear seemed to reflect.

"Indeed, I dare not answer you to-day, madame. Every Sunday the officers migrate in a body to Paris. Each one wishes to find a sub-

stitute, and being a new-comer I am usually a substitute. To-morrow I shall have the honour of letting you know what fate has reserved for me."

The visit, rather short, was finished. As the young men were about retiring, Madame Montgodfroy said to them,—

"If you are not in a hurry make the tour of the park in your cart and leave by the forest gate. By this means Monsieur de Louarn can learn the two roads which lead to Mûrier."

As the dog-cart was rolling through one of the side avenues, Fernand said to his companion,—

"You seem to be quite at loggerheads with the lady of the manor. What has she done to you? What have you done to her? or rather what have you not done?"

"Well," answered Adrien, "at bottom we are very good friends. But on the surface we do not possess either the same tastes or the same ideas, and, as I have a combative disposition, I differ in opinion. Now, if you wish to court her, here's a powerful means of seduction indeed, a perfect contrast to my own aggressiveness."

"That is possible, but I do not count upon courting her; I do not know why, but the lady does not please me. Did you not hear how she termed my father? I could not refuse her dinner to her face, but rest assured that on Sunday the colonel will need my services."

As the dragoon said these words the horses were crossing a bridge over an artificial stream which flowed between banks of rock. At the end of the bridge these rocks were raised high above the road and formed a rather deep cave, which served as a shelter against the sun and the rain. It could only be seen from the side of the stream when reaching it, and in such a way that the young men suddenly found themselves in presence of an imposing group gathered therein. On a seat formed of reeds a young girl, blonde, rosy, and of medium height, bearing in her blue eyes the melancholy look of Mignon, was surrounded by half a dozen village children, who seemed to be drinking in her words and hanging on every gesture.

Adrien stopped his horses, and, hat in hand, without leaving the cart, he said,—

“How do you do, Mademoiselle Louise? We have just left your mother, to whom I presented my friend de Louarn, and with your permission I now present him to you.”

Without budging from the seat, Louise returned the officer's bow by a gracious inclination of the head, in which could be divined some intentional reserve but no embarrassment. At the same time by a gesture, which was immediately obeyed, she ordered her class to stand in presence of the two strangers. All this scarcely attested to the truth that Louise was only a little

girl and contrasted with the semi-paternal tone adopted by Adrien in questioning her.

“You have a holiday to-day?”

“Yes, if to make others work is a holiday.”

“And might one ask what you are teaching your pupils?”

“Catechism, monsieur.”

“Oh, that is not very difficult.”

“You think so? That is not my pupils’ opinion, nor that of many people of more advanced years.”

“Well, I will leave you to your class. But we will dine together on Sunday. Madame Montgodfroy has invited us.”

There was an imperceptible lowering of the eyelids over the blue eyes, and the cart having driven away, the young catechiser resumed her task, but she was *distracted* and forgot to correct some monstrous heresies.

In the mean while Fernand said to his friend,—

“What a charming creature! How old is she?”

“I do not know anything about it. Several years ago she was fourteen, but I have just noticed that she has been allowed to wear long dresses. I wonder, having a mother like hers, if she will be able to attain her eighteenth year in this century.”

“You do not help her along. You treat her quite like a boarding-school miss.”

“What would you do? She still has a govern-

ess, and is regularly sent to her room at half-past nine, under the pretext that it is impossible to talk before children."

"Poor little thing! She does not seem to be very happy."

"My friend, when you have seen many Parisian young girls, you will be able to count those who appear to be happy. Consequently, for me who observe, society is very lugubrious."

"Oh, do not imagine that the girls in the provinces are more entertaining," declared Fernand. "My sister, who cannot be called a Parisian, always has the air of going to her own funeral."

"Would you believe that I know Mademoiselle de Louarn very little?" said Adrien. "When I last saw her she was a little girl and I a mere stripling. We stopped there. You know between our factory at Couëron and your residence at Bout-du-Bois there were ten leagues, and no railroad."

"But we passed our winters at Nantes. You could have come to see us."

"Don't make any mistake. You date back from the crusades, while my grandfather worked at the anvil at the arsenal of Lorient. I respect the hierarchy of classes."

"What a funny idea! We are no longer in Brittany now. You will soon see my father and sister. Poor Antoinette, I should like so much to have her amused a little. But tell me, is the

young girl whom we have just seen an only daughter?"

"Entirely so, and a prospective heiress, for to the paternal millions will be added the fortune of her uncle de Villegarde, who is not married."

"The devil you say!" muttered Fernand, and he fell into a silent reverie.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN La Houssaye entered the hall of Saint Urbain on the following Sunday, the first face which met his eyes was that of de Louarn. When a word was possible between them, Adrien asked, "What has happened? I imagined that your colonel would need you. But I suppose that heaven's, or rather 'la belle Martha's,' grace has appealed to you."

"Come, come, none of your sarcasm on your victim. I know all now, and I am not astonished that she is sulky with you. Cruel fellow! You did not care at one time to see that 'her neighbour' had an opportunity of becoming more than a neighbour."

"Oh, I know the legend. I bet that you have called on the old Countess de Cramens this week, who invented it. She invents one on every inhabitant of the country. She must have told

you, too, that Montgodfroy pays an annual revenue to the Anarchists not to be blown up by dynamite."

"It would be easier to believe the first than the second legend. But one thing is quite certain, Father Montgodfroy is a very amiable sort; I have already been invited to all of his shooting-parties."

"So much the better for you, for they are fine. But keep yourself well out of the range of the host, for he is not a straight shot. Have you been presented to all of this evening's guests? Everybody is here, I think."

"With the exception of Mademoiselle Louise."

"Oh, she will only come in time to go to dinner. What do you think of Thomassin, who is playing the pedant at the side of 'La belle Martha'?"

"I think that the waistcoat of this fellow would be sufficient to bring discredit to the house, in the absence of anything else."

"Fortunately, there is a man present who, on the other hand, gives credit to the house. Do you see the one who is just entering with the little Louise? It is the Marquis de Villegarde; he is a fine type, and I add, that he is my type."

It might be supposed that it was reciprocal, for on perceiving him the marquis came forward with outstretched hand.

“So you are here, you savage. What good, above all, what strong wind has blown you to Saint Urbain?”

“One both good and strong, monsieur, as it is the wind of friendship, which always drives me in your direction, and I beg that you will extend a little of yours to my young compatriot, Fernand de Louarn, who is a dragoon full of hopes.”

“I congratulate you, lieutenant,” said Villegarde, “upon being introduced by Adrien. You choose your friends well, whereas so many others choose theirs badly.”

These words, especially the last, were uttered with one of those quiet voices, well articulated and remarkably distinct, which, without being at all raised, invariably makes itself heard. The personality of the marquis was like his voice, it could never pass unnoticed, and was fascinating rather than obtrusive. Tall, of still elegant proportions, his face bore the stamp of high birth. His hair almost white, blended with a blonde moustache, brushed *à la militaire*, produced a contrast which never fails to be attractive. Fer-réol de Villegarde was a charming type of French distinction, and possessed in addition the rarest of all qualities,—modesty. Some would say that this same modesty was simply a cloak to hide a proud disdain for the approbation of others.

The gentlemen were offering their arms to the

ladies whom they were to take in to dinner. Madame Montgodfroy had reserved for herself the lieutenant, the only one this evening who could not be looked upon as an intimate friend. On the right of the host sat the Countess de Cramens,—already mentioned,—a country neighbour of small means but of considerable malice. She detested the Montgodfroys, but was resigned to visit Saint Urbain, firstly, for the sake of enjoying the good cooking, and secondly, for the possible chance of meeting there the husband destined by fate for her rather ugly daughter. Mademoiselle de Cramens, together with the governess and Thomassin,—the man of the anathematised waistcoat,—sat at one end of the table. Opposite were the marquis and Adrien and the young Louise, who were quite happy to be together, and were chatting among themselves.

The conversation was general with the rest of the guests, though there was a noticeable coldness in its tenor, caused by the unfamiliar face of Louarn.

Since certain disagreeable experiences with some of the military, Thomassin himself had become very circumspect, and was intent upon polishing up his eye-glasses, which had been tarnished by the steam from the soup. For want of a better subject, or perhaps through maliciousness, the dragoon feigned ignorance, and questioned “la belle Martha” in a low voice,—

“Is Monsieur Thomassin a journalist?”

The lady’s magnificent shoulders, well exposed this evening, were thrown backward, and her bosom swelled as she answered in words borrowed from Thomassin himself,—

“Yes, he is a journalist, like Saint-Beuve. He is one of the first critics of the day, and will be the master of the future.”

“Has he not been a play-writer also?”

These wonderfully-speaking shoulders of Madame Montgodfroy, eloquent indeed for those who could understand their language, evinced plainly to the officer that he had failed in tact in referring to the dramatic attempts of Thomassin. She replied in a slightly nervous voice,—

“He committed a great mistake in stooping to write plays. The bourgeois, whose sleep is disturbed by his subversive doctrines, has visited the sins of the Socialist on the dramatic author.”

Evidently anxious to change the conversation, the hostess turned to her other guest, Cardot, the old stockbroker, leaving the officer in the clutches of the ugly girl on his right.

In the mean while the marquis was asking his grandniece,—

“Well, will they bring you to Villegarde this year to celebrate Saint Hubert’s* day? You could

* Saint Hubert is the patron saint of hunting, and his feast on the 3d of November is always celebrated by the opening of the hunting season.

follow the hounds on horseback, you are such a capital rider now."

"Alas, dear uncle, it is not I who can decide the matter. You alone will be able to perform this miracle."

Ferréol knew perfectly well what means to employ in order to make Martha Montgodfroy bring her daughter to Villegarde for the hunting season instead of leaving her behind at Saint Urbain. He adored his grandniece, as he had adored many women, though in a different way. To have her in his house for a whole month, to spoil and pet her, was a dream which he cherished as he had cherished many other dreams less innocent. But in order to enjoy his caprice he was obliged to pay, and to pay dearly, for it, by an invitation to Thomassin, the protégé of "la belle Martha,"—and the marquis hesitated.

Madame Cardot, like all Parisians, had the mania of listening to the right when she was spoken to on the left. Having caught one word of the conversation between uncle and niece, she asked,—

"Marquis, *à propos* of Saint Hubert, has sentence been passed on your unfortunate game-keeper?"

"Not yet," said Villegarde, internally wishing his neighbour to the devil. "As the poacher seems to be recovering, I hope for a favourable verdict."

Thomassin, forgetting that in this house he should not take the part of the anti-proprietor, plunged ahead like a bull that sees the red flag flaunted in his face.

“Acquittal would be equivalent to admitting that the life of a stag is as valuable as that of a man.”

Patient as a master of the hounds is in duty bound to be in these days, Ferréol de Villegarde answered without raising his voice,—

“Please bear in mind that after having killed my stag the poacher tried to kill my game-keeper. The first shot having missed its aim, I suppose you would not have had him wait for the second?”

“Inasmuch as you are defending the game-keeper will you permit me to defend the poacher?” resumed Thomassin. “I will put myself in his place. I am a labourer out of employment. I am starving, I and mine, and within reach of my hand here is wild game,—*res nullius*,—and it promises some square meals. I shoot the animal, and for this most natural act you compel me to choose between prison and a struggle for liberty. Do you think that natural law gives you that right?”

“I beg your pardon, Monsieur Thomassin, you are not a labourer out of employment, you are a loafer. Why do you refuse to work? Afterwards, why do you shoot at my stag? Have I

shot at your cow? For you have a cow, and even a pig,—the inquest has proven it.”

“Oh, gently! I paid for my cow. She has cost me two hundred francs, even more, three hundred francs.”

“If you come to that, my stag cost me more than two hundred francs. It cost me one thousand. Would you like to make the calculation? Of the fifteen hundred acres of the forest of Villegarde one-third remains unproductive in order to protect thirty or forty animals. I have six gamekeepers, to whom I am obliged to pay high wages in order to make these agree to receive your buckshot, should such a contingent arise. Finally, I spend my time in indemnifying you for your nibbled crops if, peradventure, your fields join my forest. I assure you, monsieur, my stag is worth several cows like yours, let it be said without any offence to you—or to her.”

A laugh went around the table. Honoré Montgodfroy, who had laughed louder than the rest, said, in a tone of good humor,—

“All that is nonsense. There have always been stags, poachers, and gamekeepers, and there always will be, because it is to every one’s interest. Your cow, Monsieur Thomassin, profits no one but yourself. On the contrary, the marquis’s stag is a constant source of benefit for at least twenty persons; you to begin with, whose wounds we have already healed with some sound bank-notes;

the doctor who attended you, the druggist who furnished your medicines, your widow, whom we should have pensioned supposing you had died. Then there are the accused gamekeeper and his comrades who protect the stag against you, the huntsmen who gallop after it, the merchant who sells the horses, the tailor who makes the uniforms and riding habits. There is no end to it. And that is why I am not anxious on the Social question. To begin with, it has always existed; afterwards its existence is of interest to all, principally to those who slander it in order to gain some income."

Thomassin, it must be acknowledged, had the good taste to show due consideration for the husband of "la belle Martha." He knew how to maintain a courteous silence in case of a divergence of opinions. The hostess, more free by right of birth and conquest, objected against this conjugal optimism.

"You are the only one, *mon cher*, who would speak on the Social question in such a flippant way. It is the order of the day: it is invading every class."

"That is indisputable," approved Ferréol. "What particularly strikes me is that society is imbued with it, and we see charming women like yourself, dear Martha, gradually becoming Socialists. They are rich, they profit by Capital, and they side against this Capital in favour of Labour.

Indeed, that is quite novel, quite original, quite inconsistent,—in other words, quite feminine.”

“Perhaps that can be explained,” insinuated Cardot, with the acrimony of dyspeptics, “by observing that our friend is surfeited on Capital and knows Labour only by sight. It is thus, so it is said, that certain women, for some unknown poor man, forget the husband who has surrounded them with luxury.” Scenting a cold shiver pass around the table, he added, quickly, “Moreover, who here knows anything about labour?”

“I,” quietly answered La Houssaye.

“And it has frightened you,” hinted Thomassin, who was used to the secret thrusts in public meetings. The ex-manufacturer looked at his aggressor, and without becoming impatient said,—

“Monsieur Thomassin, perhaps some day you will support a strike at Couëron; ask the workmen if my father or I were ever chicken-hearted. There is something more than to be frightened by people: it is to be disgusted with their ingratitude.”

Pushing back what remained of his hair, the impetuous Thomassin was on the point of charging with all his force. By a look the hostess held him in check and answered,—

“In spite of all that, society is unjust. It compels some of its members to produce always for

the profit of a certain class, who store up as in a reservoir the production, in other words, the money."

"What an idea!" exclaimed the stock broker. "It is easy to see that you do not follow the buying and selling of stocks. The reservoirs called great fortunes leak nowadays like old buckets. They diminish before the eyes, owing to the suppression of birthright, the only practical thing the Revolution has accomplished, from its point of view. In a century who will be able to boast of having a million in his safe? But, moreover, what will this million yield? Ten thousand francs of income perhaps! The capital will not be worth the bother that it imposes, and the labourer who has now his mouth full of this word *Capital* will no longer care for it."

"Oh, the Jews will always care for it," sneered Thomassin, who deemed a diversion opportune.

"In a century there will be no longer any Jews," prophesied Countess de Cramens, a rabid anti-Semite."

"By Jove! I hope they will still exist," protested Montgodfroy. "We are assured that the end of the Jews is the precursory symptom of the end of the world."

"But if you please, dear madame, what will you do with these unfortunate people? burn them at the stake, perhaps?"

"I wonder what interest it is to you to stand

up for them," said the countess. "For, in fact, if there were no Jews the affairs of the self-styled Christian bankers would be none the worse."

"That remains to be seen. But, as you are speaking of interest, I have a serious one that my brothers in Israel may be spared. We are told that some very good Catholics were shot with an arquebuse during Saint Bartholomew. I distrust some of these errors more or less voluntary. It is all very fine to say that God recognises His own; I should not like, for my part, that the recognition took place on the top of a pile of dry wood—too late to call in the engines."

"Pshaw!" said Ferréol, laughing, "errors do not count; it would only be, as your wife would say, one capitalist the less. What I should like to see is the ceremony of the auto-da-fé advised by Monsieur Thomassin. In former times the crucifix was carried before the son of Judas trembling within his sulphur shirt. As an interpretation of the doctrine of the Crucifix it was objectionable; as logic it was consistent. But since that time you have burned the Crucifix, then why should you burn the Jews?"

"These people do us an incalculable evil, Monsieur le Marquis," said Thomassin, "and you visit them."

"But, *cher monsieur*, you also do me harm, and, moreover, you wish to do so by your doctrines.

Yet I dine at the same table with you. It is the progress of the century."

Madame Montgodfroy deemed the moment had come to sound a retreat. With an expression of severity, she said,—

"I do not wish to have religious questions discussed before my daughter."

Naturally, a deathly silence reigned, which was broken by La Houssaye after an instant by this clever remark :

"It would be just the moment to pose the usual question when a conversation flags: 'Madame, do you often go to the theatre?'"

The hostess deigned to laugh.

"Your question is decidedly out of place in September," she said. "Moreover, I have reached the point of profound disgust for theatres, music, painting, books, in fact, for everything which is done to-day."

"My poor niece," remarked Ferréol, "that is what happens by being carried away by the odd, exotic and new idea. You put vanilla in the soup; you suppress vinegar in the salad in order to introduce it in your chocolate cream. Is it any wonder if your stomach is a little fatigued? Follow my example: cure yourself of Ibsen by going to hear Molière."

With eyes fixed in space, Thomassin scratched the scanty hairs which covered his chin, and from his mouth fell this oracle :

"Oh, Molière! He never understood the theatre; but then in his time the critic had no existence."

"The critics," replied Villegarde, without being upset by this thrust, "they are to civilization what the marble-cutters are to a large city. When you see their workshops increase, rest assured that the cemetery is not far distant"

"The cities are the glory of our *fin de siècle*," declared the châtelaine.

"Evidently, my dear niece. But allow me to say that I prefer Phidias to the marble-cutter who chisels a statue of Phidias for the tomb of Phidias. And I prefer Bossuet to the man of wit, however commendable he may be, who lectures on the genius of Bossuet."

"I have nothing to say of Phidias," replied Thomassin. "As to Bossuet, I will not accuse him of chiselling tombs, in spite of his funeral orations. But he remains for me the abbé who had luck, the Seminarist who had success."

This was the end. Martha rose, not without having approved by an eloquent look of this broadness of views. Shortly afterwards they dispersed in the alleys of the park, which were lit by electric lamps. Fernand followed, close on the heels of Louise. Thomassin was in private conversation with the hostess a little apart. Perhaps he was giving a last thrust to "the eagle of

Meaux." However, what most occupied him was his cigar, or rather Montgodfroy's cigar, a pure Havana of forty sous.

CHAPTER IV.

THE next day La Houssaye breakfasted with his friend, and naturally they spoke of their last evening's dinner.

"If I were curious," said Adrien, "I should discover why, contrary to your resolution, you went to Saint Urbain yesterday. You are making up to the young Louise, or I am greatly mistaken."

"Oh, you know, say the word and I will retire sooner than trespass on your ground."

"My ground? Oh, dear, no, she is a child; and, between ourselves, you are beginning the campaign before the melting of the snow."

"The trial costs nothing. If I waited until she was twenty she would be engaged to some one. Do not fancy, however, that I indulge in any illusions on my chances. But I have learned it is necessary to burn a hundred cartridges to kill one enemy."

"I notice that you are not counting solely on your career to enrich you."

"Well, am I wrong?"

“No ; but if you wish to be invited to Saint Urbain you must not repeat the three faults which you have committed.”

“Three faults ! Great heavens ! I believed I had only committed one in dubbing Thomassin a journalist.”

“That makes four, then. Firstly, you have looked too much at the daughter’s blonde hair. Secondly, not once at the mother’s shoulders, and gracious knows she showed them to you ! Finally, you did not compliment Montgodfroy on his electric lamps.”

“I might have complimented him on something else. Look here, between ourselves, is this Montgodfroy an imbecile ?”

“No ; he is a man who despises his wife, that is all. She ought to be on her knees before him, for she was as poor as a church rat when he married her. He is disgusted with her ingratitude, and the rest.”

“Why, then, did he marry her,—for love ?”

“I cannot very well imagine Montgodfroy in love. But he had among his patrons the Marquis de Villegarde, at that time embarrassed with the guardianship of the young Martha, who, report said, aspired to be something more than his ward. Montgodfroy, who was forty years old, tired of the vendible pleasures, sought a companion,—loving, faithful, devoted. The marquis proposed his niece.”

“A pretty present! No matter, if only he would offer me his grandniece; it is said that hereditary vices may skip a generation.”

“You would not be afraid of making a *mésalliance*?”

“My friend, I am afraid of but one thing, but that is not the falling of the heavens: it is poverty. An empty stomach causes many hallucinations. Look at my father,—and as for my sister, she already begins to frighten me by her ideas. By the way, they have arrived; come and see them on Saturday.”

La Houssaye promised a visit, and returned to Mûrier at a jog-trot, his lungs expanded in a fresh breeze, his brain gently occupied with the ordinary interests of life, thinking of his sports, his horses, a change he contemplated making in a few days in order to go duck-shooting in Sologne.

But, the Saturday after, when he returned the same road, adieu to this happy tranquillity of mind. He was thinking solely of the vision which he was bringing away with him, that of a superb creature whose hand he had touched, whose voice he had heard, as though in a dream. How could he have been so audacious as to invite her with her father and brother to his house? How could she have accepted? She had accepted, however, with the beautiful smile of a goddess. And in three days the grandson of the blacksmith

of Lorient was to entertain at his table this resplendent daughter of the Crusaders,—Antoinette de Louarn!

The presence of one or of several guests was not an unusual event at Mûrier, and occasionally there was a wife with her husband or a mother with her daughter. Even though the host pretended to disparage his bachelor hospitality the good management of his house was proverbial. But he displayed for the benefit of this guest, only rich in nobility and beauty, a refinement that his millionaire neighbours had never experienced. He was clever enough, however, to veil his extravagance through force of good taste. No one would have guessed what he had paid for each of the roses brought from Paris that morning which filled his dwelling. And Mademoiselle de Louarn, who had most innocently remarked a few days before that she had never tasted Scotch grouse, will always remain in ignorance of the price paid for the mere telegrams exchanged with Edinburgh in order to procure her this unknown luxury. But above all was she still ignorant upon arriving at Mûrier that the thoughts of a man reputed difficult to catch had never left her since their meeting at Meaux. With quite a royal punctuality this unconscious queen, together with her father and brother, alighted at noon from the least miserable “growler” that Meaux had been able to furnish.

She was a tall, statuesque girl of twenty-four, possessing an admirable face, a divine figure, and wonderful hair, the colour of a chestnut not quite ripe. She invariably commanded admiration, but many men went their way after having admired her, as though kept aloof by doubts. After a little study of these deep, magnificent, almond-shaped eyes, one might ask if beneath the graceful folds of her gown this beautiful creature carried a living, palpitating heart. When she abandoned herself to her thoughts there could be detected in her glance, already veiled by bitterness, this secret sadness of never being interested in life, which mysteriously gnaws the present generation.

At sight of this room, changed into a parterre of roses, there was a sort of inquisitiveness in her look which added a brightness to her beauty. "Can this man be in love with me?" she asked herself. But it was only necessary for so complete a woman to see Adrien's anxiety, to see him watching for a sign of approbation, to understand everything. She had no longer a doubt. It was not the first time that she had noticed in regard to herself this love at first sight, which excited rather than charmed her. In her greatest triumphs she had remained a cloud which shines, incapable of kindling itself.

She had never been rich, and was not ignorant that, thanks to the sublime reveries of her father,

she was poor now; but she was too well bred to show the shadow of astonishment, or even a too lively pleasure, in contact with others' luxury. Thus she enjoyed so much the more all the elegancies of life because the unknown sentiment of envy did not spoil her pleasure. Too intelligent for coquetry, she treated La Houssaye as a friend of her childhood, even at the risk of appearing older. In this way she could the better play the temporary mistress of the house. The marquis sat on her right. Adrien had invited him, fearing that all alone he might not creditably acquit himself of the honors of the house. During the first part of breakfast Ferréol showed himself to be the fascinating man that he was still, and that he always had been, in the presence of a pretty woman.

Suddenly his manner changed. With the redoubtable penetration of a society man and an old courtier his eyes read a hidden suffering beneath the smile on his host's face. From this moment Villegarde understood, or at least suspected, the truth. Without losing any of his charm he exerted it for the benefit of another. He paraphrased, so to speak, the honours which Adrien heaped on his beautiful guest. He drew attention to the studied refinements, counted the roses, commented upon the perfection of the menu, and compelled the host to relate the story of his grouse.

"We must not deceive ourselves, mademoiselle," he finally said. "We are at the house of a man unequalled for his great wisdom. He has found the secret of happiness, which I condense in these words, a large fortune and a small house. That is such a relief from the distressing spectacle caused by many small fortunes struggling with immense houses. The English, who have more droll sayings than we have, perhaps, in spite of their reputation, call this the upsetting of the laws of equilibrium, a champagne appetite and a beer income. *À propos* of champagne, my friend, where the deuce did you get this nectar? I must write to-morrow in order that you may find it at Villegarde next month. Oh, I forget that you only drink water."

Monsieur de Louarn, who had all the trouble in the world to prevent the rain from penetrating his "immense house" at Bout-du-Bois, exchanged a look of sadness with his daughter, who immediately became like marble. As though to console her father, she said,—

"I have never desired a great fortune; there must be some cruelty in walking through life surrounded by the envy of others."

"Ah, mademoiselle," replied Ferréol, "that is a species of suffering of which you must have had a superabundance. One can pass Vanderbilt in the street without knowing that he possesses millions, consequently without envy. On the

contrary, how few women can pass you without feeling envious? I am no longer young and do not make madrigals. But wealthy men can give away part of their fortune, whilst even should you wish to share your beauty it remains yours alone."

Fernand de Louarn added, laughingly, "Indeed, up to now, Thomassin has not insisted that those who have hair should share with the bald, nor that the plump should enrich the lean with a part of their advantages."

"The incurable evil of physical inequality demonstrates to us that perfect equality is not the intention of the Creator," observed Pierre de Louarn. "It condemns the doctrine sustained by Monsieur Thomassin, who, besides, did not invent it."

"No, but he has well developed what many others have forgotten," answered Antoinette.

Utterly astonished, Adrien exclaimed, "What! mademoiselle, you know him?"

"Through some of his articles. I often assist my father in his work, and that obliges me to read a great deal."

"Well," said the marquis, with a gentle sigh, "you will see Thomassin at my niece's house; for I hope you will allow me to open the doors of Saint Urbain to you."

"I know," Antoinette answered (she knew many things through her brother), "that you have a most charming grandniece."

Fernand de Louarn, who had been a little taciturn, suddenly appeared to awaken.

“I have a proposition to make. Why not return to Meaux by Saint Urbain? Will you come with us, La Houssaye?”

The idea met with general satisfaction, and they left the table for the garden. When they approached the statue, the marquis related its history, with panegyrics on the two owners, the past and the present. He added, addressing Pierre de Louarn,—

“I advise you to see the Abbé Esminjeaud, who, like you, works to bring together two classes somehow at odds at the present hour. But you differ in your systems. The abbé, who is both my friend and neighbour, does not resort to either newspapers, pamphlets, clubs, or lectures.”

“But I make use of other means,” said de Louarn, becoming animated. “I call around me the great family of labourers. I invite them to sit in my well-warmed house, around my lamp. My amusements are theirs. I espouse their claims. I warn them that they must live by work, but that they have the right to their competency. I promise them the recognition of this right, provided they are wise and are Christians.”

“Well,” replied Ferréol, “my abbé himself penetrates into this family, having only in his hands the crucifix. On the wooden bench in the hut, cold and poor, he seats himself when he is

not driven away. He says to these people, 'Behold, I am colder, hungrier, and poorer than you,—and I was rich.' But what does it matter? Some day we shall be satisfied, we shall be warmed, and together we shall sing the canticles of eternal joy, provided we believe in Jesus Christ, the God of the poor."

Antoinette listened, her large eyes fixed on Villegarde with some astonishment. Pierre de Louarn asked, satirically,—

"Does your abbé make many conversions?"

"Not many, though he has converted me. But these men listen without understanding him. These words are an unknown tongue, which is no longer taught them; it is Catechism."

"It is still taught at Saint Urbain," said Fernand, "for I have seen Mademoiselle Montgodfroy catechising the village children."

"Yes," answered Villegarde, "she crams half a dozen young ones with barley sugar, and they keep quiet while they recite the Creed. It is a reduction of Christian Socialism, if I am not mistaken."

"Perhaps so, but it is the Creed after all," replied Pierre, who did not apparently enjoy the joke. "You acknowledge yourself that your abbé has not succeeded so well."

Seeing that the two men were deep in discussion, the young dragoon pulled Antoinette's dress, at the same time winking to the host, and

all three stole away, leaving the two older men to fight it out. La Houssaye, who generally was interested in these serious questions, had not said a word. Speech returned to him, however, when he was alone with Mademoiselle de Louarn and her brother.

"You will be in Brie for some time?" he asked her.

"How can I know, possessing a father so mobile as mine? A telegram may call him this very evening to a lecture at Montpellier or Rouen; he invariably accedes. Naturally I cannot stay alone at an officer's quarters, so I must perforce return—to dear Brittany."

"It appears to me that you speak of your 'dear Brittany' with some irony."

"Oh, I am fond enough of my country, but it is it which is not fond of me. My father, who has visited America, allows me more independence than is tolerated with us. I frighten my friends, I may add that, indeed, I frighten myself sometimes when I am with them."

They had reached the stables. Antoinette expressed a wish to see the horses; with a sigh, she added,—

"Formerly I used to ride a great deal. My father had me follow the hounds. But he has no longer the time, and for still more serious reasons, he has no longer the horses."

"I have an idea," said La Houssaye, with an

air of delight. "You shall hunt at Villegarde next month."

"Why not at Marly with Louis XIV.?" she said, shrugging her shoulders slightly.

But Adrien, without noticing his guest's chaffing, forthwith built a diplomatic combination, he who had never troubled himself to find anything else but stags at Villegarde.

Two hours later the Louarns, the marquis, and their host of the morning were entering Madame Montgodfroy's. She, contrary to what might have been expected, welcomed Antoinette with enthusiasm. It was one of her claims never to be jealous of the beauty of others. But above all she was entranced to know the already celebrated Christian Socialist. Even Thomassin quoted and sometimes approved of him in his liberal moods.

Whilst she was charming Pierre de Louarn in showing him a breadth of ideas unlooked for in the wife of a banker, the young people, reinforced by the presence of Louise, were chatting in a corner of the hall. From the first exchange of phrases the young girls pleased each other, or to put it more correctly, Mademoiselle Montgodfroy submitted easily to the influence exerted on very simple and upright souls by more complicated natures. Fernand and his friend, like singers in good voice, were showing themselves off to advantage. However, the practised ear of

the marquis distinguished a discord in the ensemble, a vague dissonance in the quartette. These musicians lagged behind. The officer was making an effort to keep the attention of Louise, who, unconsciously, had only eyes and ears for La Houssaye. But his eyes were only for Antoinette, and the latter, less nervous than the three others, free from all preoccupation, moved with a broad and easy gait in her triumphant beauty. She did not try especially to attract these men; nevertheless, the instinct of a true woman led her to the only one of them who could appreciate her,—the Marquis de Villegarde. After the visitors had departed, carrying away an invitation to dine the following Sunday, Louise returned to her governess. The marquis remained alone with his niece, leaning his shoulders on the huge chimney-piece, and silently staring at the rose window in the ceiling.

“I have just been taking a youthful plunge,” said he after an instant.

“Oh, I saw very easily that you admired this Brittany Venus. Take care, my handsome uncle, you are at the age of folly.”

“Not yet, my dear; I am only at the age of nonsense. But I have profited somewhat by the nonsense of others. It is the commencement of wisdom. And then there is in her eyes, the most beautiful in the world, a little glint of steel, which makes one reflect, like the point of a pin clumsily

placed in a bodice and which defies indiscreet fingers. Finally, her hair is coarse, and her wrists and ankles are thick. You must always distrust these physical anomalies in blood: they may be the precursors of others. Ah, if she but had your wrists and ankles!"

With a curious smile Martha Montgodfroy turned her single bracelet, a simple circlet of gold, around her marvellous wrist.

"Well," said she at last, "if she had my wrists and ankles, I think you would hunt for a second Honoré Montgodfroy in order to make him a gift."

"But, *ma petite*, if I had married you we should have been at sword's points fifteen years ago. You detest what I admire in literature, in art, in politics. At the first decadent poet, at the first landscape painter escaped from Bicêtre,* at the first Thomassin, whom you would have liked to make my intimate friend, you do not know what storms the world would have seen."

"You are the one who does not know. Does one ever know? Perhaps at this moment I should be living between 'le jeune homme pauvre' of Feuillet's, the nymphs of Bouguereau, and the *Idoménée* of Fénelon. Come, like many others you know women—on their worst sides. But to return to our guests of a moment

* Bicêtre, the largest lunatic asylum in Paris.

ago. I have been enchanted with Monsieur de Louarn."

"I not so much. It is true that the *ralliés* inspire me with a very mediocre sympathy."

"But, my *bon petit oncle*, you were a *rallié* to the Empire?"

"Not in the present sense of the word. I never cared for politics. I was fond of good hunting, fine fêtes, beautiful women, in a word, the court. You did not know this court, this empress, the charming women that surrounded this adorable woman. What am I saying? Certainly, you knew your mother, who was not the least of them. At any rate, I have been faithful until the end, until my captivity at Leipsic."

"Pierre de Louarn served in the war as one of Charette's zouaves."

"Egad, and a brave man he is. I wish, my dear niece, that there were only men like him to be found at your house."

CHAPTER V.

THE dinner-party on Sunday, which included more guests than usual, disappointed the mischievous hopes of the marquis, who secretly desired to see Thomassin and Pierre de Louarn seize each other by the throats for the benefit of the

spectators. Either because Madame Montgodfroy had coached the apostle of collectivism, or because he considered any Socialist, even Christian, a soldier of his own army, their intercourse was civil, and resembled much less a discussion than an exchange of ideas. Nevertheless, Ferréol with positive playfulness tried more than once to foment discord between the champions. He was very near attaining it when he questioned a blonde widow, pretty and elegant, who was known to love pleasure, and who had been invited to Saint Urbain on his account.

“And you, madame, are you interested in Socialism?”

“I? Gracious, no! I do not comprehend the profound theories,” she answered. “But I admit that it seems monstrous to me to see people working from morning until night while I do nothing. That is the light in which I look at Socialism.”

“How can you say that you do nothing?” cried Villegarde. “I insist that you do more work yourself than twenty women of the working classes.”

Thomassin, whose big ears had not lost one word of the conversation exchanged around the table, courteously protested,—

“Twenty, indeed! Humph! that is a good many.”

“I should have said fifty,” insisted Ferréol.

“For it is a heresy to measure labour only by the effort displayed. Labour—let us speak from a social point of view—is estimated by the money not received, but, on the contrary, spent. The working-girl who earns two francs for fifteen hours’ labour puts two francs into circulation. You, dear madame, enter Virot’s. Let us suppose that you remain there only one hour, and that you order one single hat at two hundred francs. During this hour you have caused the same circulation—in other words, you have produced the same labour—as one hundred poor girls working for one day.”

“In order to sustain this argument,” replied Thomassin, who in no wise enjoyed struggling with this supple adversary, “you would have to convince me that this modiste had not deposited in the bank one-half of the sum paid by Madame Lepin. This half, then, is lost for circulation, and it is precisely this half that I claim for the working-girls.”

“A fine advantage for each individual!” objected the marquis. “But, in the mean while, let us suppose that Madam Lepin has decided to make her own hat, here is Virot forced to discharge one-half of her girls; the same may be said for the dressmaker and *lingère*. Consequently, madame, the worst service that you can render to social equilibrium is to use your needle; thus you might incur the blame of society.

Quiet your conscience: buy all the pretty dresses you like, provided you reserve something for the poor."

Up to this point Pierre de Louarn had listened in silence. Carried away by the subject he entered into the discussion.

"Monsieur de Villegarde demonstrates very rightly to us the circulation of capital as one of the necessary functions of the social body. It is like the circulation of the blood through the human body: it is the condition of life. But Monsieur Thomassin points out the danger: capital accumulated by the great producers. This is why we preach in favour of uniting the individual producers, otherwise called Labour Unions."

"Bravo, Monsieur de Louarn!" said the mistress of the house. "Progress owes you a crown."

"Oh, well," said the little widow, "I distrust this progress. Rouff's work-women formed into a union would give me the horrors. For want of ready money they would only have the materials to be found everywhere else. And, to cap the climax, I should receive my bill every month."

"Yes, assuredly," said Thomassin, as he shook his bald head; "so, while these unions furnish the labour, it is indispensable that Capital should furnish the funds. Madame Lepin herself demonstrates it. How are you going to get over that, Monsieur le Marquis?"

“Oh, I am not going to get over it. The question is insoluble. Have you never seen a poor man, worn out by extreme old age, consumed by disease requiring pernicious remedies? While healing his lungs you are destroying his liver. You call in the doctor and you pose this same question: ‘Doctor, how are you going to get over it?’ Your doctor tucks his hat under his arm and goes away on tiptoes. ‘Insoluble question, you must put down straw in the street.’ And I am of the doctor’s opinion, Monsieur Thomassin, but I make no charge for the consultation. Our society is too old, it is dying of four or five diseases. I admit that it is not your fault; only, if I put down straw in the streets, your friends will eat it.”

Everybody laughed, except the hostess and Thomassin. There was one, however, who was prodigiously amused and laughed louder than the others; it was Montgodfroy; he said, raising his glass,—

“Messieurs and mesdames, do not let us bury Society yet. It is like Villegarde, it advances in years without her growing old. It lives in a different way, it interests itself in other things and speaks of them, that is all. My dear Ferréol, you are as charming as you were at twenty-five; you are charming in a different way, nothing more; I drink to your eternal youth.”

Thus was the discussion smothered, or rather

drowned, as the glasses of champagne were emptied. Thomassin, after a discreet hint from "la belle Martha," stood up and courteously saluted the marquis, his adversary of a minute ago. It was a reconciliation of which he would not have boasted to his "friends," to whom Ferréol had referred so contemptuously. But Madame Montgodfroy willed that Thomassin should be invited to Villegarde. This peace-making was still more noticeable in the hall where the evening ended, as a shower interfered with an adjournment to the park. After coffee the guests formed themselves into groups. There was the group of serious men from which soon proceeded the odorous fumes of the Havanas. Thomassin was there, momentarily calmed in his bald apostleship by this luxury of the Gentile from which he profited. There was the coterie of women, grouped by themselves around the fireplace, in which were blazing the first logs of the season. Finally, behind the piano were the young girls and the governess. Fernand de Louarn after some clever manœuvring was just about to sit down beside Louise when his friend drew him aside.

"Miserable fellow, what are you going to do? Quick, go near the fire."

"But I am not cold," said the officer.

"Not cold? you are glacial,—so far, at least, as 'la belle Martha' is concerned. Hurry up, tell

her that she has the most beautiful shoulders in the world. Do you imagine that she makes an exposition of them for the benefit of two or three old cats and for the little Madame Lepin, who, moreover, is an exhibitor herself?"

"Well, and you?"

"Oh, I do not count, and then I am sure of being invited to the hunting-parties of Villegarde, while you have to propitiate the benign goddess."

Fernand obeyed, and La Houssaye returned and seated himself near Antoinette, who apparently expected him. In a low tone she asked,—

"Has Monsieur Thomassin any influence in the literary world?"

"Such a noisy critic ought to possess some influence. Nevertheless, he has given up a little the literary for the political world, where he makes still more row."

"Is he a man inclined to help others?"

"I doubt it, he has too much to do for himself. But it would be necessary to be still more Thomassin than he is to refuse you anything. Moreover, he practises a peculiar system of apostleship; it is among the women that he recruits his disciples. Between ourselves, his idea is not so bad."

"Even in the event of surprising you, I should like to have a chat with him. But do not imagine that it is about Socialism."

Adrien got up, very happy to obey. He was not jealous of Thomassin, but if he had been, his obedience would have been just the same. For him, Mademoiselle de Louarn was a creature partly superhuman, who had every prerogative, even that of making others suffer for her caprices. Two minutes later Thomassin was beside her, brought by La Houssaye, who would have carried him if necessary. Five minutes had hardly elapsed before the young girl and the apostle were deep in a conversation, seated a little apart. Adrien, heroic to the end, had joined the coterie of young girls. He did not see the flash of joy in Louise's eyes, any more than he saw the flash of disapproval in the eyes of "la belle Martha."

"You wished to speak with me?" said Thomassin. "How could I help being curious to know what the daughter of such a father as yours thinks? I do so much admire Pierre de Louarn. He has such courage to do what he has done, to seek the truth for and against everything."

"Ah, the truth; where is it to be found?"

"You ask that, living so near the light."

"This light is so cold; it throws such hard rays on the present, on the future a ray so fatal. I am a little afraid. Where are we going? When shall we arrive? Time passes, my father is growing old. Many admire him from a distance; nearer, there are old friends who politely

turn their backs, or who look at him sadly, but in silence. As for me, I am nearly an old maid."

Thomassin understood that he was in duty bound to find a happy reply. In his voice, timbreless, the lecturer answered gravely,—

"If you mean that you have ceased to grow beautiful, I can believe it easily; everything has its limits in this world. But you have scarcely begun life."

"And already I am so tired. Does not that signify to grow old? If only this lassitude came after some useful work! But I have never done anything. I have only thought, thought, thought, having no one to whom I could tell these thoughts."

Thomassin, who had received some confidences from women, indeed from some honest women, immediately understood; and, so true is it that beauty grants surprising privileges, his first impulse was not to run away.

"I see," said he, smiling. "You have written a romance perhaps? You wish me to have it published. It is amusing to see oneself for the first time in print."

"Great heavens! is it, then, so easy to see that I am trying to write?" she said.

"No, mademoiselle," replied the master, gently; "but to-day if you guess at random that a woman uses her pen, you run very little danger of a mistake. Moreover, I will prove it."

He approached the group formed by Louise Montgodfroy, Jeanne de Cramens, and the governess.

“Mesdemoiselles, we are trying to establish some statistics,” he asked, maliciously. “Those among you who have a manuscript tucked away in your writing-desk will please hold up their hands.”

The governess and Mademoiselle de Cramens dared not budge, but betrayed themselves by blushing up to their eyes. Louise declared that she had no time to write.

“You see,” continued Thomassin, resuming his *tête-à-tête*, “out of four subjects three are caught, including yourself. Then women only write when they are unhappy. So we can conclude that among the young ladies gathered here this evening at Saint Urbain Mademoiselle Montgodfroy alone is content with her fate.”

“But I am contented with mine,” protested the proud Antoinette. “Only, as I have told you, I think a great deal and I am surrounded by people who think. These can speak, and their words like their thoughts never quit those distressing subjects,—poverty, privation, hunger, and thirst for happiness and justice. I am like a clock in continual movement, where the dial is wanting, the hammer of which strikes into empty space. At such moments I write in order to expand my soul a little; I strive to invent

happiness, to create some people who are happy."

"Humph!" said Thomassin, "mere dreams! Why not some efficacious action in reality?"

"Because I should require the power and wisdom of God to give bread, rest, a shade of joy to the unhappy beings who are crushed with work. And to give them all that without making the world worse than it is to-day! The masters of the greatest nations recoil before the problem."

"Yes," said Thomassin, assuming his apostolic air, "they content themselves, like the marquis, with laying down straw in the street. And yet you side with them. You love authority and law because they are the guardians of your social pleasures. You respect dogmas because they conveniently settle troublesome questions. And whilst humanity is tossed about on a bed of sorrow, you write novels. Well, give me your novel. It shall be published, and you will be happy, won't you?"

Mademoiselle de Louarn made a motion of revolt and shook her superb head. She replied,—

"Why this disdain? Those who know me a little wonder if I shall ever be quite happy. I, who know myself best, am sure that I shall not."

"Well, then you belong to us. For as great as may be our hope, as rapid as may be the approach of light, well do we know, we, the pre-

cursors, that the great day will come only to lighten our tombs into which we shall descend, but never satisfied."

A voice made the two interlocutors turn. Madame Montgodfroy, who could no longer remain indifferent to this suspicious *tête-à-tête*, was standing beside them.

"What! mademoiselle, you listen to these theories without yawning, without recoiling?"

"Oh, madame," answered Antoinette, "Monsieur Thomassin can make some people recoil, but yawn: oh, no!"

It was easy to see that the young girl admired the eloquence of her companion, but that she admired nothing else in him. Moreover, there was a double man in Thomassin, the apostle and the sybarite, who frequently struggled to pull together. At this moment he had on his mask of apostleship, and Martha felt all jealousy evaporate. In the same inspired tone, but without raising his voice, he continued,—

"Mademoiselle de Louarn is a soul, she is one of us, for all those whom the social iniquity robs of sleep are brothers. What a pity we cannot see her often! She writes: we should be able to help her. I am sure that her heroine is not commonplace. Your other young girls always tell their own story in their first novel."

"And also in the others," said Martha; "that is why the first novel of a woman is nearly

always her best. She puts into it all the flowers of her basket."

"So much the more reason," replied Thomassin, "not to let your manuscript slumber, dear mademoiselle. Will you send it to-morrow?"

"Do better, come and breakfast. I will send the carriage for you, and you can bring the manuscript with you. Monsieur Thomassin, you will please make the sacrifice of not returning to Paris until the evening."

But she added, placing her fingers on her lips, "Be silent, for we are conspiring."

"Ah, a conspiracy! I ask to be one of you," said Adrien, who approached, seeing the *tête-à-tête* broken up.

Half seriously, half jokingly, Martha replied,—

"You are perfectly aware that they conspire from morning until night at Saint Urbain. But you come too late; we no longer admit recruits."

With these words she walked towards the fireplace, and as Thomassin prudently followed her, she threw this taunt at him behind her fan:

"You are like Caro now, you indulge in a literary flirtation."

Alone with Antoinette, Adrien regarded her with so much combined astonishment and unhappiness that she could no longer leave him in doubt. In him she saw an admiration out of the ordinary, and naturally felt flattered by it, but, let it be said to her credit that she cared

not less for the esteem than for the admiration of this honest man. Already buoyed up by the hope which Thomassin had given her, she said, laughingly,—

“Do not give full scope to your imagination; you have before you a *bas-bleu*, nothing more, and it is a question of publishing my manuscript.”

“I do not like to see you in the clutches of this fellow,” said Adrien. “Will you grant me your confidence? Before the end of a week a newspaper will publish your first sheets.”

“Even if you are compelled to start a newspaper for the purpose? What a fine thing it is to have a fortune!” she added in a tone of bitterness.

“Yes,” replied La Houssaye with downcast eyes, “it ought to be fine,—beneath the feet of a woman beloved.”

CHAPTER VI.

MARTHA MONTGODFROY possessed a defect common in Parisians of mediocre value: she displayed to strangers either a disdain for their inferiority or, according to her caprice or the weather, she became an enthusiastic friend.

Here is what happened in respect to Madem-

oiselle de Louarn. At the breakfast, which took place as proposed, she discovered that Antoinette was a soul to employ Thomassin's words. The rich châtelaine looked at this young girl and saw in her what she herself had been at twenty, when all that she needed at that time was to find her ideal in life. True, Antoinette's ideal was different, more elevated, better held in subjection by conscience, but above all more vague. However, there were the same reflections engendered by solitude, the same struggles against discouragement, the same absence of satisfaction, if not already the same rancour against life. And more, Mademoiselle de Louarn had inherited from her father the restlessness of mind which raises unsolvable problems. She ingenuously declared,—

“But for Christian faith I should float in the mist, like the hull of an unfinished vessel, launched too soon. It is a frightful misfortune to lose one's mother at fifteen. Better almost perhaps never to have known her. The props suddenly fall from the craft and it slips. My father has not understood me. He has heaped the cargo on the poor vessel, mastless and rudderless, and then I am accused of being proud, of scorning amusement, and of not being like others.”

In order to pump her, Madame Montgodfroy said,—

“You should perhaps have married quite young.”

Antoinette replied with her invariable frankness,—

“I have never been asked by a suitor who deserved—even hesitation.”

“In the upper classes marriage has no reason to exist unless accompanied by a large *dot*,” began Thomassin. “In the same way that death, without inheritance, is only a physiological phenomenon, considered quite secondary, for those who survive.”

With a sign Martha motioned him to silence, and turned to Mademoiselle de Louarn.

“Perhaps you wish that love precede the betrothal. In the provinces one is still at that low level.”

“Indeed, I am not provincial, I think. Firstly, I have made several sojourns in Paris, where I have seen society; and, secondly, we live, my father and I, in quite an intellectual atmosphere which does not savour of the provinces. Moreover, I have seen how some love-matches end, sometimes.”

“I fancy that you could see how some begin, at least on the side of the lover,” said Martha.

While making this allusion to Adrien’s passion, Madame Montgodfroy was watching the face of the apostle in the glass. But she did not detect

any uneasiness in it. Antoinette's beauty evidently did not affect Thomassin. As to the young girl, she replied with a smile,—

“I am afraid that there is some mistake. Let us well understand each other. It is a publisher I want and not a husband.”

Thomassin took a parcel that was reposing on the table, and, as the breakfast was over, he said,—

“Allow me, mademoiselle, to gain some idea at least of your work. In an hour you will have my opinion.”

Alone with Antoinette, Madame Montgodfroy took a Turkish cigarette and lit it; she then posed this question:

“What do you think of Adrien La Hous-saye?”

“I can only reply to you by one word, he is an honest man.”

“There is something more, dear mademoiselle. He is the man whose head you have turned. I know him; he pretends that woman can be suppressed as a nuisance to existence. He is going to pay for his mistake now, and I am too feminine to regret it. You will allow that *he* deserves something more than hesitation. He has a fine fortune; and then he possesses an inappreciable quality in a husband,—a fine dose of *naïveté*.”

“But, madame,” answered Antoinette, a little

upset, "Monsieur La Houssaye has only seen me four times."

"With such philosophers once is enough to make them lose their heads. One thing remains: does he please you?"

"How am I to know?"

"Well, my dear child, you must know it. I will give you the means. Trust to me. You are the neighbour whom I should wish to have at Mûrier. The house is small for a couple, but it could be enlarged. Besides, may heaven defend you from great châteaux wherein one is lost!"

Even though Antoinette's head was sound, she forgot a little her manuscript. Madame Montgodfroy made her talk on a thousand subjects, sounding, so to speak, her qualities and weaknesses. But the time had come for the visitor to return to Meaux, the coupé was waiting and Thomassin had not come back with his verdict. At last he appeared.

"Mademoiselle," he said, hunting his words a little, "it is very good, it is even a little too good. Your characters are all perfection. It is necessary to tarnish them a little. You would understand me if we could talk together. But you are just leaving."

"We will arrange matters so that mademoiselle de Louarn can hear your observations," said Madame Montgodfroy. "It is only postponed."

“Oh,” said Antoinette, “I am not blind. I see very well what you think; I should have done better had I tried to make artificial flowers. Adieu to glory!”

After her departure Thomassin was no longer restrained from speaking his opinion.

“The devil!” he cried, thumping the table. “How astonishing women are with their literature! Here is a thinker, a seeker, one would say, sometimes a revolter, who cooks up the same old love-story which has been used by all novelists called honest for the last hundred years.”

“Sublime doctor of critics, allow me to tell you a thing or two. Very often the women who are the thinkers, the searchers, the revolters, think of but one thing, seek for one thing, revolt against one thing,—it is the absence of love, and love is easy to find—on a blank page.”

“With all that, how to break it to this young girl that she was never intended to be an author? She will be inconsolable.”

“Not entirely. As a compensation, I have just shown her that she was made for a more fruitful career, which is to marry La Hous-saye.”

“Money, money, always money,” said the apostle, shrugging his shoulders.

“But, *mon cher*, your special kind of theorists speak only of money from morning until night.

That proves that money is not to be despised after all."

"One would think that you wish this marriage?"

"It would amuse me. It will be droll to see this man, impregnable, impeccable, impassive, in the hands of Antoinette de Louarn. She will shake him up, rest assured. Then I have other reasons."

"What! more mysteries?"

"We have no longer any mysteries from each other. I suspect that my husband and uncle have some secret designs regarding the owner of Mûrier, and I do not intend that my daughter should bring one of the greatest fortunes in France to this good fellow. On the contrary, would not you and I experience a slightly malicious delight to see the money of the father La Houssaye, the sweater of workmen, fall into the hands of the daughter of Louarn, the champion of the labouring classes?"

"There is an arm of the sea between us and Louarn."

"Who knows? perhaps there will be but a rivulet between his daughter and us. We will manage that she shall be invited to the hunts. You would not refuse to come, most austere man, and we will see some *hallalis* of more than one description."

"Oh," said Thomassin, "you debase me to

the level of your diplomacy, I, who was made to fight. I have always thought that a propagator of ideas is lost if he gives himself up to a woman."

"Say that without laughing," said "la belle Martha," stretching herself in her *fauteuil*, her hands behind her head, her eyes brilliant with a tawny reflection.

CHAPTER VII.

DIPLOMACY is the art of obtaining without violence a certain thing that one does not wish to give. It is true that the marquis was not overjoyed with the idea of galloping after a stag in the company of a Collectivist. In fact, galloping is a purely metaphorical way of putting it, for Thomassin had never known the horse except in the vulgar relations of this quadruped with the *fiacre*. He, himself, hesitated to take part in these cynegetic *fêtes*, which in his eyes were the last vestige of the debased people of the middle ages. The problem consisted, then, of not only obtaining the invitation for the apostle, but of making him accept it. An ordinary diplomatist would have paled before this complication.

But there was nothing ordinary in the means

which Martha could employ in regard to Thomassin. She achieved success, first by resorting to sarcasm, then by examples drawn from history.

“Are you going to scowl now at the ‘luxury of the bourgeois’? That is all very well for the veterans of the old school. Besides, you are no more compromised by my uncle’s stags than you are by our pheasants. Do you pose, then, for a *Septembriseur** who visits the political assemblies with spear in hand? No, you are an intelligent apostle, such as were seen in the palaces of the Cæsars. Remember your device, ‘Social revolution germinates in the slums, but it is in the hot-beds of wealth that it must flourish.’”

Thomassin could not refuse because he had culled some very substantial flowers at Montgodfroy’s expense. There was nothing left now but to besiege the marquis, and for such a campaign allies were not wanting. A half-dozen persons hypnotised him by their desire, the same intense desire of passing two weeks beneath the same roof without quitting each other, under the pretext of hunting at Villegarde. Poor marquis! all these would-be hunters thought very little of his admirable pack and admirable meets. Adrien, himself, no longer cared for them. He saw only Antoinette’s eyes,—those impenetrable eyes which had become

* The worst class of assassin during the Revolution.

indispensable to him. Never was a piece of diplomacy better managed. Not only did Fer-réal yield, but still more he deemed it necessary—a droll idea—to excuse himself to La Houssaye, in a way, for his capitulation, considering him as the most serious of the party. He had come expressly to Mûrier to see and tell him.

“*Mon cher*, I am greatly embarrassed to make up my house-parties. You will be of them all naturally: there is no good hunting without you. But Louise is dying to come, and I am dying to have her, but in order that the little one may not be alone I have been asked to invite Mademoiselle de Louarn, which necessitates an invitation to the father and the brother. Finally, to crown all, I wager one to a hundred you cannot guess what great sportsman my niece wishes me to invite.”

“Cardot, perhaps,” said Adrien, feigning ignorance.

“No; Thomassin. That will be a hunting-party with a vengeance. Out of ten or twelve persons who will crowd my château, there will be three men capable of remaining in the saddle. Now, what sort of a hunt will we have?”

“The first outings of an ‘*equipage*’ are never the best,” observed La Houssaye, mischievously. “This first party of amateurs will give us the opportunity to exercise both dogs and men.”

“Yes, but Thomassin? I admit that he is

correct as a general, but that does not prevent one from knowing his ideas. What will be said of me?"

"What could be said? The Prince of Wales has even dined with Gambetta. Remember, moreover, for your guests this fellow is no novelty."

"Yes, that is so. When I feel ashamed of my weakness, I will think of the Prince of Wales. Let it be so, then, for my first party of amateurs, and may '*Monsieur Saint Hubert m'ait en pitié.*'"

Villegarde entered his carriage, while Adrien mounted his horse and galloped to Meaux. Antoinette de Louarn was alone in the little apartment which they occupied in the hotel. Her father had just gone to Paris, her brother was on duty.

"Good news!" said La Houssaye, radiantly. "You are coming to Villegarde."

"Perhaps this news is not so delightful as it seems to be. I suppose it will be necessary to mount a horse," said the young girl, her cheeks flushing; "and since last year our stable has been reduced to one old carriage-horse. It is useless to say that I am rusty."

"That is nothing; you have two weeks before you."

"Had I two years, it would be just the same thing, seeing I have no horse to mount. It re-

mains to be seen if, out of the several hundred which are curried at the quarters every morning, my brother will be able to provide me with one of these useful animals. At any rate, I have brought my riding-habit."

"Are you in the least fond of hunting?"

"I like it as I like all the pleasures of this world, without enthusiasm."

"And might one ask what you do like with enthusiasm?"

She reflected a moment, and, evidently not finding the answer easy, she smiled with an air of desolation on the young man, who devoured her with his eyes.

"My silence is unfortunate. You are convinced now that I have a heart of stone."

"I remember to have seen a fellow once play on an instrument made out of flint," said La Houssaye. "He drew from it charming music. Who knows the surprises which a heart of stone may furnish! Your malady passes away sometimes. I have had it."

"And you were cured? The remedy, please, the remedy!"

Adrien had a fine opportunity to reply, but in those beautiful eyes he thought he detected a sudden flash of cold light, which plunged him again into his timidity.

"I do not believe that the remedy would act as quickly on you as it did on me," said he,

sadly. "What you need is a prolonged treatment. Let us return to the subject which brought me: Will you try one of my horses?"

"A lady's horse? You have one, then, in your stable?"

Adrien detested a lie, but there is no conscience so strong, no judge so loyal, but sleeps sometimes. He lied bravely, and replied,—

"It so happens, by chance, that I have one. You must mount to-morrow. You must not lose a day."

"To-morrow! it is impossible. My brother will not have an instant free."

"Well, can I not escort you? Do not forget that I am old friend of your father's. Besides, you are somewhat of an American, as you have already said."

"Would to heavens we were in America! But, alas! we are in France, where the dirt of suspicion immediately sullies the friendship of the two sexes."

"You have a friendship for me?"

"Certainly," said Antoinette, "much."

At the sound of this word, "friendship," Adrien, partly happy and partly sad, kissed her hand. She continued,—

"You are not, then, so wise as I thought. The proverb says never lend your horse. I add that I cannot offer you a kingdom in exchange, as did King Richard in a similar situation."

“I ask no kingdom; I only wish to be Master of the Horse to your Majesty.”

From that time he adopted the habit of thus styling her when they were talking together. He thought the appellation well suited to her sovereign beauty.

Having agreed that Mademoiselle de Louarn would ride on the next day but one, they parted. The young man was rather pleased than otherwise at this delay, which gave him none too much time to select, buy, equip, and take back the “horse which he had by chance in his stable.” An hour later he was in Paris. Jumping into a carriage, he drove straight to a horse-dealer, where he knew he could find one of those steeds that the serious buyer follows from stall to stall, as a connoisseur follows a Natier or a Greuze from collection to collection.

The bargain was quickly concluded with advantageous conditions for the horse-dealer. Then Adrien felt satisfied at least as to how Mademoiselle de Louarn would be mounted. To tell the truth, he felt less easy as to the way she would ride. At all events the horse was gentle; not too young, capable of keeping his head through the hardest country, or of showing a pretty woman off to advantage in a gentle canter through the alleys of the forest, according to the tastes and capacities of the individual. Adrien slept in his rooms in Paris. The follow-

ing day he shipped to his own address by express a lady's saddle made by Beck, the celebrated firm. Then mounted on his purchase, at a cautious speed, he made the nine leagues which separated him from Mûrier.

On the day fixed for the trial he was up at dawn. At a too early hour, at least so he thought, to meet any one, he left his house on the animal which he destined for the honour of carrying the beautiful Antoinette. No one could have contemplated, without laughing, this personage in cap and boots seated sideways, the right leg thrown over the pommel, the lower part of the body draped with a light covering which simulated a skirt. In that get-up he had just galloped across the fields and was gaining the road by leaping a ditch near a clump of trees, when he perceived a horseman who was watching him as motionless as a mounted sentinel. This horseman was none other than Villegarde, also an early riser. When Adrien, who at that moment, to tell the truth, wished him at the antipodes, was within ear-shot, the marquis asked,—

“So you have bought Elphin? Since when?”

“Since yesterday. You recognise him? What an eye you have!”

“By Jove! It is not difficult to recognise him. His like does not run in Brie. Besides, he has already hunted at Villegarde. I still see, and you also, the adorable creature whom he

carried, one of the hardest riders, one of the prettiest women in France. And I could have predicted then what afterwards came to pass,—imprudence carried too far, the eyes of the husband opened, a duel, lawsuit, and divorce, and the charming sinner disappeared on foot in the crowd of our too numerous *declassées*. Suddenly poor Elphin was put up for sale. Upon my honour it upsets me a little even to see him.”

“Naturally,” said Adrien, a trifle embarrassed, “I ought to explain. I must appear rather ridiculous——”

“Ah, *mon brave*, I have been ridiculous in the same way more than once, and I regret those happy times. But you are disgracing Elphin by trying him. However much Mademoiselle de Louarn may be out of practice, she will be able to guide him with a silken bridle. For evidently it is for her that you are trying the horse.”

“Well, yes, for the moment I will lend Elphin to—— But later he will be an addition that I much needed in my stables.”

The two followed at a jog trot along the deserted road, the poplars of which had been stripped of their sere and yellow leaves and were now bathed in dew.

After a brief reverie, Villegarde addressed his companion,—

“Do you know what I am thinking about? Of the responsibility one incurs in inviting

people to one's house. And possibly but for a certain invitation which I gave, the animal that you are riding might still be in the possession of his former mistress. And, perhaps now, another invitation will decide the fate of Elphin. Let us hope that he may not be a 'Jettatore.'"

As Adrien observed a silence, Villegarde continued,—

"I hope you will allow me to express my thoughts. You are one of the men that I am fondest of, and had I a wife I might have had a son of your age. So this gives me the right to sermonise a little: my dear Adrien, I think you are going at rather a high rate of speed."

"In the matter of an acquisition to my stables?"

"Nonsense. Why speak in parables? Scarcely forty-eight hours have elapsed since I told you of my intention of inviting Louarn and his daughter to my house. The next day you spend, oh, I know quite well, three hundred louis in order that this beautiful creature shall have one of the most experienced hunters in France. And I find you this morning putting poor Elphin through a regular examination, who, by Jove, does not need it. These are things one only does when one is madly in love. I repeat it, my friend, you are going at too quick a pace. Where will you be at this rate after a week spent together in riding through my woods?"

"Who knows?" replied the young man, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"You are your own master, certainly. Too much so, alas! There is no one to give you advice, and it is such a serious question, that of marriage. I admit that she is charming; no, she is not charming; rather, she is superb. Such women lead you either to heaven or hell, there is no middle course. Conclusion: one must study, know them, as much as possible, to find out what is in their hearts."

"I am trying to find it out," said Adrien.

"Yes, you remind me of a man in a fever who tries to feel the pulse of one in good health. A fine diagnostic! Slacken your speed; it is so serious. It is my belief that each one of us comes into this world destined by God for a certain woman. Where is she, this affinity who waits for you? Is it this rider who will mount Elphin? Or does she live elsewhere,—near you, far from you, knowing of your existence or ignorant of it? Will you meet her later—too late—unhappy, both of you, condemned to suffer, to betray, saying both at the bottom of your hearts or crying it aloud, 'Alas, it was you!'"

Ferréol's voice was deeply moved, as though the misfortune he had pictured was not one of mere conjecture. A singular gravity weighed vaguely on this interview, in which for the first

time Adrien had betrayed his love. On leaving Monsieur de Villegarde soon after, which he quickly did, he said,—

“I count on the most discreet of men not to mention this meeting, somewhat odd——”

“Oh, rest easy,” replied Ferréol, shaking his head several times.

And when his grandniece an hour afterwards kissed him, he declared, with a morose air, that he had just had a remarkably tiresome ride. Nevertheless, for the rest of the day he had a luxury of attention and caresses for his young relation, at which Madame Montgodfroy showed some surprise.

“How you spoil the child,” she said.

“It is to set an example to Fate, which may perhaps spoil her less,” answered Villegarde.

La Houssaye returned home calmer than he had been for two days. The words of the marquis had strangely touched him. His fever had fallen, giving place to a painful lassitude. He found himself simply grotesque in his costume of a moustached Amazon. A momentary reaction showed him, in this eagerness to serve Mademoiselle de Louarn, how ridiculous he appeared. Who could foretell what she would think of a service rendered her with a zeal quite worthy of a college boy? Might she not discover in it an exaggerated and compromising gallantry? Had the unhappy fellow passed his horse-dealer

on the road, nobody could assert that he would not have returned poor Elphin.

But he met only labourers, incapable of appreciating the merits of this three-quarter Irish thoroughbred. After a suitable rest, Elphin was conducted to Meaux by a responsible man, and, of course, followed by Adrien.

The flash of pleasure displayed in Antoinette's eyes at the sight of *her* horse was quite enough to cure the poor lover of his morning's anxiety. To tell the truth, the rider was too little accustomed to high-priced animals to judge Elphin at his real value, whereas the more practised eye of Fernand recognised at the first glance a horse of great value. After admiring him in silence, he said, with visible astonishment,—

“I did not know that you intended to increase your stables.”

Antoinette feigned not to understand, but she had guessed the whole story.

An hour later the three friends were galloping across country, and when La Houssaye saw the fine appearance of his *protégée* he did not regret his money. Elphin was installed at Meaux. Every day these three rode out together, which considerably improved the progress of Mademoiselle de Louarn as a horsewoman, but did not much advance the affairs of Adrien as a lover. For him she remained more than ever “Her Majesty.”

In due time the invitation arrived in the form of a polite letter to Monsieur de Louarn. Adrien remarked this coldness, as he had thought that the marquis would have called in person. It was decided, however, that their ride on the following day should be to Saint Urbain, when the acceptance would be given. The head of the family, who spent several days a week in Paris, excused himself from not accompanying his son and daughter in their visit.

Besides, the visit was short. "La belle Martha" was alone, her uncle and daughter having just gone out for a ride. In the evening, Madame Montgodfroy remarked,—

"Surely there is one who has no vanity," speaking of Antoinette. "Her riding-habit was all frayed out at the bottom and looked quite threadbare, save where it had been enlarged with some new pieces."

Honoré, who had arrived from Paris for dinner, answered, meaningly,—

"Her riding-habit may have displayed her poverty, but it cannot fail to show her form, which is better. That girl is a statue."

"Possibly; but she is not a statue of wealth, anyway," replied Martha, cuttingly.

She surrendered to others without jealousy the regularity of features, but she would not allow anyone to make comparisons as regarded the *ensemble*. Honoré continued,—

“Well, my dear, you may come to wearing frayed-out riding-habits yourself. Louarn has swallowed up everything by following what you are,—Socialism. You and your friends should give him a pension instead of poking fun at the worn petticoats of his daughter.”

“You have hit it better than you think. We are counting upon his daughter’s handling a fine income one of these days.”

“The day when social iniquity will be over?”

“No; but the day when the statue will become Madame La Houssaye,” replied Martha, after being sure that none of the servants were within ear-shot.

“Ah!” said Montgodfroy; “that is your idea, is it?”

“Well, I do have ideas, sometimes.”

The butler returned, which necessitated the conversation taking another turn. But after a few words, Ferréol, whose eyes had not left his grandniece’s face, exclaimed,—

“Look, Martha; I believe your daughter is fainting.”

CHAPTER VIII.

ONE would have to search France a long while to find an estate like that of Villegarde, not that the château, rebuilt after the revolution, is remarkable for its architecture, which is banal, nor

for its dimensions, which do not exceed the ordinary. But it occupies the centre of a forest, having the privilege, most rare in these days, of being traversed neither by a railroad nor by a roadway. If the owner had chosen to surround it by a wall, he could have changed into a park this irregular oval of five kilomètres long by three wide, which resembled an island detached from the wooded continent of Fontainebleau. But the marquis is too wise to raise any obstacle against the incursions of any roving or terrified stags that stray from the great forest.

“They like to come to my grounds,” says this keen sportsman. “The grove is not large, but there the animals are undisturbed. Seldom the noise of a vehicle, never a report of a gun, no pedestrians, for the site has nothing of the picturesque in it. Moreover, the Parisian bicyclist would not find a *café* restaurant there either for himself or for his lady.”

No proprietor in France can profess to be “at home” on so extensive an estate. Thus, Ferréol, at Villegarde, allows himself the luxury of leading the existence of a little monarch. He even has his own army—six unmounted and two mounted gamekeepers—come every morning to receive their orders for the day and night manœuvres against poaching, when he is there. At times, when he cannot sleep, the marquis calls for his cob and reconnoitres to see if the patrols

execute promptly and noiselessly their rounds. For, as he constantly asserts, *à propos* of everything, "the stags must not be disturbed."

Thanks to the paternal precautions which surround them these multiply. They nibble the neighbour's wheat, and the marquis pays for it, just as he pays for the rabbits which increase without discretion in blissful ignorance of the hunter's shot. The neighbouring proprietors do not take the trouble of manuring their lands, for it is not the crops which will afford them their revenue. But a time comes when the stag is disturbed from his tranquillity. On one of the first days of November, the pack, the huntsmen, the gamekeepers and the whippers-in file into the chapel of the château. The sound of the hunting-horns summons the guests to the loft, and the Abbé Esminjeaud, "my chaplain," as the marquis laughingly calls him, intones with his beautiful tenor voice the Mass of Saint Hubert.

After the service the horses are mounted, and beneath the great oaks of the preserves may be seen the animal which is to serve for the day's sport, bounding away at full speed, as well as the bright scarlet coats of the hunters in pursuit.

As was hitherto the custom, the same ceremony was observed on a beautiful November day in the year 1893. Ferréol had followed Adrien's advice, and made up, as he called it, a preliminary house-

party composed of the personages already known to the reader. But to these had been added a certain number of friends and neighbours, officers from Fontainebleau and Montargis, all of whom had come to assist at the mass and to follow on horseback or in breaks the first stag hunt of the season.

“When I carry my whip as Master of the Hounds, I expect all hands to obey me,” declared the marquis.

During the first *déjeûner en famille* he gave each one his orders.

“My dear Adrien, I know you to be extremely prudent when the safety of a riding-habit is in question,” and he winked knowingly in allusion to a certain ride on Elphin; “so it is you whom I select to watch over the *début* of my grandniece. Monsieur de Louarn will, of course, escort his sister. You, Martha, can make your own choice among your companions for a body-guard. As for myself, especially for a first *sortie*, I must gallop after the hounds.”

It may well be imagined that these orders were not to the liking of more than one of his guests, but no one protested.

The marquis, in his severe hunting costume, with his tall figure, his moustache *à la militaire*, his eyes full of fire, commanded obedience as well as admiration.

“Mesdemoiselles,” said he, “allow me to re-

place Diana's quiver by a more convenient attribute." And he presented each of the young girls with an elegant poniard in a velvet sheath, which they deftly attached to their belts. Ferréol then drank to the ladies and to the success of the day.

Three of the invited guests were absent, but they were not, in truth, serious sportsmen. Montgodfroy was at his bank, Pierre de Louarn was presiding at a pilgrimage of workmen at Montmartre, while Thomassin pretended to have proofs to revise,—perhaps the idea of the mass had alarmed him. It was understood, however, that these three absentees would arrive by an evening train in time for the Saint Hubert dinner.

But the hour had come for hearing the reports of the huntsmen. According to the morning's work, they had the choice of several stags. The marquis, as a rule, selected a young one from the vagabonds, as he called them. But on this day he chose an old royal, and as he offered his arm to Mademoiselle de Louarn to escort her to the chapel loft, he explained his reason for this decision. "This is the first time that my little Louise follows on a hunter, and we do not want to stumble on a wild fellow who might drag us as far as the *Gorges d'Appemont*,"—so much the worse if the run be short. On the threshold of the chapel two mounted gamekeepers, hunting-

knives in hand, stood like mounted sentinels, and six game-keepers on foot bearing the halberd did the honours. The pack was already waiting, massed before the chapel, kept silent by the whip of the Master of the Kennels.

When the marquis had taken his place at his *prie-Dieu*, the joyous notes of hunting-horns rang out in concert with the baying of the dogs, then suddenly perfect silent reigned.

A young priest stepped forth, robed in his sacerdotal vestments, his look full of energy, his entire presence irradiated with an aureole of mystic happiness. One felt that this bizarre assemblage, this altar gleaming with candles, these sonorous horns, these howling dogs, had no existence for him. All his thoughts were concentrated on the coming mystery of the Holy Sacrifice. As he turned around, Antoinette's eyes sought his, which were not lowered but lost. And, contrary to her expectation, she prayed during this mass with a fervour which she piously regretted that she did not always experience.

At last they started, but not before the host himself had inspected the stirrups, bridles, and girths of the three ladies' horses. He said to Antoinette,—

“Give your horse full rein at fences. He is an old stager, and knows what to do when he has a woman on his back.”

"You know him, then?" the young girl asked, astonished.

"Yes, mademoiselle," replied the marquis, nodding; "and it is the second time that he carries the most beautiful of my guests."

Without saying another word he turned away, but this dispassionate compliment falling from such lips gave Antoinette a pleasure which she had not felt at the most ardent declarations of others. Her eyes, less calm than usual, seemed to follow in the distance the motley mass of the pack which arrived at the meet, led by the whippers-in and the huntsmen with their glistening horns.

Suddenly she started, as though awakened from a dream, at the voice of Adrien.

"Well," said the young man, "have you at last found the unknown and longed-for thing which is to rouse your enthusiasm, and which you were seeking the other day?"

"Almost," she replied, with an enigmatical smile. Then, feeling that she was ungrateful, she added,—

"I am sure that I shall quite feel it after I have galloped on my horse after the hounds, and it is to you I shall owe this *fête*."

"Ah," murmured the young man, "what are all the *fêtes* in the world to me, compared to that which the mere sight of you gives to my eyes? Alas, I am forbidden to escort you. Grant me your pity."

She shook her head without speaking, which was tantamount to saying that she declined to pity him, and so they parted; he, going to join Louise Montgodfroy and assist her to mount. While doing so, he asked himself,—

“Why am I not to be pitied, then? What does she mean? Is it merely a commonplace politeness towards the young *débutante* whom I am escorting, or does this incomparable creature encourage me to hope.”

“Messieurs, you are not entertaining,” said “la belle Martha,” who was trotting on the other side of her daughter. “What is the use of being young, then?”

Fernand de Louarn, who was following with Antoinette, answered,—

“That is just the question I ask myself twenty times a day. These rascally poets try to humbug us with the delightful *insouciance* of youth. Of course, I am speaking of the troubadours of twenty years ago. Those of our times are not so stupid. Youth! why, it is the age *par excellence* of care. Since my tenth year I have worked like a galley slave. My twenty years have left me some atrocious memories; the examinations of Saint Cyr,—a question of life or death; then my rank on leaving the Academy; then Saumur; then the military stripe, and only at the fourth shall I have time to breathe. Then perhaps I shall be gay.”

"How would you like to be in our place?" asked Antoinette. "We must remain common soldiers all our lives, seeing we are forced to obey men and their laws, which they invent."

"Oh!" exclaimed Adrien, "with some women there is no necessity to command. One endeavours to read their wishes in their eyes. Mademoiselle," this to Louise, "you are forgetting that you are on horseback. Hold your bridle tighter."

With the shadow of a smile the young girl followed her mentor's advice.

"I obey," she said; "for I love to obey."

In spite of Martha's reproach, the young people continued taciturn until they came to the meet, which fortunately was not far off. There they found Ferréol already doing the honours of his forest with an inimitable grace, a trifle stiffly to the men, but so much the more seductively to the women, who one and all doted on him. After a few introductions, they started to strike the trail, and, shortly after, the hounds sighted the stag. The animal did not try to break cover from the forest of Villegarde, but only to gain on the dogs in an open space freshly cleared of trees. The tremendous pace at which they were now going was not long in separating the riders according to their merits or the quality of their mounts. Madame Montgodfroy, a good, though, as her uncle said, a "showy horsewoman," re-

mained among the last, not wishing to overtire her daughter. Adrien, therefore, tied by his duties, was compelled to swell the number of the prudent and wise. Young Louarn and his sister, on the contrary, were among the first galloping away at a furious rate. But when the stag, soon tired of doubling, made for the plain over land cut by bushes and streams, the pace became alarming.

It was then that Elphin showed his mettle. The lieutenant, whose charger had not the same advantages, soon felt that he could no longer keep up with his sister.

“Not so fast! not so fast! you are going at a break-neck pace,” he cried.

But, either because she did not wish to hear, or because Elphin’s blood was up and he would not slacken his speed, she continued to gallop at the same rate, never losing sight of the tall outline of a hunter a quarter of a kilomètre ahead, who, as usual, was not outrun by anyone.

The animal, however, had now left the plain, crossed the canal, and reached the full slope of the quarries which extend from Souppes to Château-Landon. The hounds swam across the canal. Ferréol should have continued in a straight line in order to reach the lock. When he gained the other side of the stream, the supposed direction, he rode rapidly to the summit of a ridge, accessible to a horseman of his skill, but which the work of excavating, abandoned

to-day, had changed on the opposite slope into a terrace almost perpendicular and a dozen mètres high.

This place commanded an extensive view, but neither stag nor pack was visible in the distance. He listened; not a sound; suddenly he caught sight of a shepherd, who, from the foot of the cliff some hundred yards off, was making signs to him. But where was he to find a practicable descent without risking an almost certain fall? Skirting the excavation, he finally discovered a sort of moraine formed by an accumulation of detritus of stones, and by this very dangerous and inclined plane he reached the man, who was now redoubling his signs.

As he was on the point of questioning him, an infernal uproar, which seemed to come from the bowels of the earth, gave him to understand what had become of the hunt.

"There they are!" cried the man; "they have jumped pellmell from the place where you stood. If you could only have seen them! I am sure that the stag has only three legs to stand on."

"Yes; but he has a good pair of antlers," replied Villegarde; "my poor hounds are having a hard time of it. Will you hold my horse?"

He seized his hunting-knife, and in two minutes reached the entrance of a large subterraneous cavity, long since abandoned by the quarrymen. There, in the uncertain light, he

saw some forty hounds, whose furious barking was dominated at intervals by the lugubrious wail of some victim. Ferréol soon caught sight of the stag backed against the wall, butting with his horns and selling his life dearly. It was not without great trouble and positive danger that he reached the animal to kill him.

As he turned round to whip back the pack, a female form advanced, poniard in hand. It was Antoinette.

“Oh! oh!” cried Ferréol; “you have come to die with me? That is well. By Jove! little did I think this morning that I was arming a veritable Diana. But allow me to keep these hounds in check, if we want something left for the quarry. Ah, here is my huntsman; let us leave it to him. I am going to call our companions.”

He emerged from the cave, climbed the slope, and, standing on the ridge, seized his hunting-horn with the noble gesture of a victor. At this moment Villegarde would have made a charming subject for a painter. With his right foot on a stone, his left hand on his hip, while the right was raised to place the horn to his lips, he inflated his broad chest in order to send forth the joyous notes of the *hallali par terre*. Some paces behind stood Mademoiselle de Louarn, who had followed him, even as she had been following him for an hour, her instinct in some way taking the place of her will. In the meadow on

the other side of the canal several hunters were galloping, and some whippers-in advancing with rapid strides, hastening at the call of an all-powerful master. The young girl, her large eyes no longer melancholy, was eagerly drinking in this spectacle, the remembrance of which would henceforth never leave her. Suddenly she cried out,—

“Great heavens! you are wounded.”

In fact, a tiny red stream was trickling from Ferréol's left hand.

“It is nothing,” he said. “I did not know that I was scratched. One cannot see clearly in that cave, and I fear that my bow-wows have been much more hurt than their master. What! you are a surgeon, also? Are you, then, one of those women who are alarmed by nothing?”

Tearing her handkerchief into strips in order to bandage the wound, she replied,—

“Every woman at certain moments becomes intrepid. Perhaps, had I been there, I might have protected you.”

She spoke with such extraordinary animation that this great reader of human hearts was struck by it, and doubtless it was not at random that he replied,—

“You were the first to arrive: that was capital. Ah! but what a horse! You would do well to thank him who loaned him to you.”

There was a strange smile on her lips, the smile which women have sometimes when they

witness the ironical recompense awarded by fate to certain devotedness. But she was not obliged to answer, for several of the hunters now came up, among them Fernand de Louarn. Instead of complimenting Antoinette, he rebuked her sharply.

"You rode like a mad-woman. It is a miracle that you are still alive," said he; "you, who are generally so cool on horseback."

Still smiling, she replied,—

"Well, scold my horse; he is responsible for everything. As for me, I have turned fatalist." And bending her nymph-like form she culled a daisy upon which a drop of blood was drying.

An hour later they were all gathered beneath a great oak, for the quarry. Catching sight of Adrien, who had remained faithful to his duty in escorting Louise, the marquis addressed him gaily.

"Poor Crillon! * you have not hanged yourself yet? What a fight, my friend. In the history of Villegarde it will be recorded as the *Journée des Demoiselles*." In a few words the Master of the Hounds related the prowess of Antoinette. There is no need to say that she

* Crillon was the most devoted companion of Henry IV., and had fought with him in nearly all his battles. One day, however, Crillon was absent, and the king was forced to sustain the brunt of the battle alone. Afterwards he wrote to his friend Crillon only these simple words: "Go and hang yourself, brave Crillon; we have gained the day without you."

had *les honneurs du pied*. She dropped a louis, which she had just borrowed from her brother, into the huntsman's cap.

"My poor boy," she said, in a low voice, "when shall I be able to repay you?"

"Oh," replied the young man, gaily, "I will give you credit. You are riding a horse that cost six thousand francs."

"Six thousand francs!"

"Yes, and a celebrated horse, too. Somebody has just told us the history of Elphin, bought expressly for you. Now that you know it, do not kill him. It would be more difficult to reimburse your lover."

"What! my lover?" said she, with a singular look contracting her eyebrows. At this moment Adrien came up.

"Will you come and lunch?" he asked. "Our host forgets nothing. Just look at all these good things which are spread out on the grass. After such exploits I have no doubt you must have a keen appetite. How you rode!"

"And you," she answered, "how you *lied* about the lady's horse which you had *by chance* in your stable! All the same, I thank you."

"Oh," replied the young man, "you must understand that I needed a recruit. And it was a bargain."

Antoinette was not a coquette, and, greatly moved with pity for Adrien, she exclaimed,—

“*Mon Dieu!* what a mistake you made in buying this horse which gallops so quickly.”

At these words she burst into a flood of tears. Adrien looked at her dumfounded, incapable of understanding. Everybody inquired the reason of this outburst.

The marquis, never at a loss in a difficult situation, came to the rescue with a smile.

“It is the reaction. I would have bet on it. You have been too daring; and, besides, you have ridden five leagues at a gallop. I prescribe a glass of champagne for you.”

As he spoke he poured out the wine, taking care of her with the grave gentleness of a father. And as she was drinking, her eyes still bright with suddenly dried tears, Louise cast a pure look, ineffably painful in its resigned melancholy, from Antoinette’s beautiful face to that of Adrien.

But no one remarked Louise’s sadness, not even Fernand de Louarn, who was talking with her, evidently more occupied with himself than with anything else. But as the heiress did not reply, he suddenly discovered that she was watching Antoinette.

“You think my sister very stupid, don’t you?” he asked, somewhat vexed. “But I can assure you that you are also very pale.”

“It is the first time that I was ever present at a quarry,” said Mademoiselle Montgodfroy by way of explanation.

CHAPTER IX.

THE break despatched to the neighbouring station brought back for dinner the three Parisians, Pierre de Louarn, Thomassin, and Montgodfroy. Two outsiders only were invited for this meal, both favourites of the master of the house. One was the Abbé Esminjeaud, "the chaplain" of Villegarde, the other Madame Lepin, the pretty widow who amused Ferréol as the droll doll that she was. Just enough of a horsewoman to follow the pack from a comfortable distance, she came from her little château of Bougligny, to attend all the hunts. She dined very often at Villegarde when the marquis's niece was present, and if one could place any faith in the wagging of tongues, she had even dreamed, like so many others, of one day occupying the chair at the foot of the table.

Even though Ferréol often declared that he spent all his money on his hunting and that he and his guests were reduced to crusts, the meals at Villegarde were remarkable for their abundance and gaiety. At certain stag-dinners in the late fall after "la belle Martha's" return to Paris, the conversation frequently drifted into a Rabelaisian current, which apparently afforded relaxation to the exhausted hunters. But this evening

Ferréol had among his guests a priest and two young girls, to say nothing of Thomassin, who was a restraint to everyone save to Madame Montgodfroy. So the silent truce of the soup lasted longer than usual. The air of Villegarde did not very well agree with Thomassin's lungs, but he determined to make the best of it, and began to discuss the literary aspirations of Mademoiselle de Louarn, who was seated beside him. The young girl, however, allowed him to do all the talking, and apparently had forgotten the hopes that formerly inflated her mind. Ferréol, to put everybody in a good humour, commenced a tirade of pleasant jokes on his right hand neighbour, which it invariably amused him to do.

"Poor Madame Lepin, is what I have heard true; that you have ridden so hard your horse is done up?"

To everyone's knowledge the little widow trembled with fright at the mere idea of donning her habit, and she mounted only for the sake of being *chic*. Never did her hunting exploits exceed a canter in the easy alleys at half a league behind the hounds. But she was good-tempered, and quick-witted enough to reply to the chaff of her host. With a toss of her blond head, she said,—

"Go on talking. You would like to see me break my neck, I suppose. No doubt my heirs have bribed you in order to second their impa-

tience. Poor people ! bitter surprises await them in my dressmaker's bills."

"If it was only a question of surprises, you might give them still greater ones. But you appear to share the opinion of Saint Paul, who points out the state of widowhood as the most—desirable there is in the world. Is it not so, abbé?"

A very boyish humour shone in the priest's eyes, who, absorbed in his thoughts, could not have told whether he was eating salmon or cod-fish.

"That is the way some people understand quotations. The fact is that Saint Paul has mentioned widows—with interest. But in what species of humanity was this great benefactor of mankind not interested?"

Pierre de Louarn, who always saw things on the serious side, answered gravely,—

"That is precisely the argument that I have sustained in my last lecture. How quickly he would have arranged our social questions, this profound genius who has converted kingdoms."

Thomassin, out of professional jealousy, no doubt, had a severe word for his elder apostle.

"I have always thought that Saint Paul found some solutions too easily. He put an end to the sufferings of the unfortunate by sending them to martyrdom."

"And he was ready to follow them, and he

did, too," gently added the priest, "That is what crowns the simplicity of his method."

Montgodfroy, plunged in a *salmi* of woodcock, summed up these opinions while cracking the brains. "Pshaw! Martyrdom! Who has not gone through that? Everyone in his turn. In ancient times the kings and emperors cast the Christians to the wild beasts; later on they themselves were guillotined, shot, and not always canonised. The crucifiers of Calvary had a bad time of it, and will have more. As we bankers say, the accounts are squared up. I think that the time has come for everybody to keep quiet and to breathe a little."

"It is easy to see that you have just come from the Bourse, my dear," said "la belle Martha."

"But, my dear, the Bourse is the greatest school of philosophy that we have to-day. For, behold, even bombs do not frighten the speculators in stocks."

"Like the Roman Senators who sat in their curule chairs awaiting the Gauls," said the marquis.

"Well," continued the financier, "what did your Gauls gain, those Anarchists of their times? The Romans, that is to say, the bourgeois, returned to their homes after having whipped them, carrying away their wives and daughters, and France sprang from them."

“Which proves,” said Ferréol, “that the *Gauloises* in the days of Cæsar were already charming. Come, gentlemen, let us drink to their health and to the *Gauloises*, still more charming, of to-day.”

“Mesdames,” added the little widow, “I propose the health of the Romans, the fierce husbands of our grandmothers.”

“So much the more readily since they are dead, which always renders a husband adorable,” continued the host.

The Abbé Esminjeaud joined in the general laugh, then raising his clear voice, he said,—

“In addition to those who married the *Gauloises*, let us not forget those who have converted them. But for Christianity we should not enjoy our present civilisation.”

“Oh, Monsieur Abbé, beware,” replied Thomassin, “you are thereby responsible for the bombs. They are the result of the excess of civilisation.”

“Yes, just as the inventor of locomotives is responsible for accidents. Are not switchmen there for some purpose? The Social train has run off the track on the switch of Atheism.”

“For goodness’ sake, please let the bombs rest!” implored Madame Lepin. “That is a word which ought to be interdicted.”

Adrien, from the other end of the table, spoke out,—

“Dear madame, the interdiction exists with a nation better governed than ours. I refer to the Turks. Last year I was in Constantinople while Paris was being blown up. The papers of the Bosphorus mentioned the fact of houses demolished and people killed. As to the cause, it was a mystery. Should the journalist have dared to print the word bomb, he would have been impaled. He is not so much as allowed to print dynamo because of its resemblance to dynamite. Monsieur Thomassin may sneer, but Constantinople, which does not know the name, up to now is fortunate enough not to know the thing itself.”

Thomassin did sneer, in truth, while he pulled the yellow hairs of his thin beard.

“We need no longer seek the remedy, for it is found,” said he. “We must turn Mussulmans.”

“Or Christians,” suggested Pierre de Louarn.

Thomassin was on the point of replying. He seemed to be warming up, and his “Egeria,” fearing that he would take the bit between his teeth, said, cutting short his speech,—

“Oh, if one could only hope that religion would heal the miseries of the people.”

Antoinette, who sat opposite the priest, saw his face transfigured by faith, just as it had been that morning in the chapel. In a vibratory voice the minister of God said,—

“No, to the end of the world we shall always have the starved, the afflicted, and the weak among us. Why give false hopes to the unfortunate? One moment of resignation, then peace without tears, without fatigue, without trial by the severity of human injustice. Such are our promises. They have already consoled those Gauls oppressed by their conquerors, whose sons we are. What did we not do for them in the first centuries? We have rescued them from the barbarians. We defended civilisation, which was still wailing in our arms. It suffers at the present time, because enfeebled by age; it looks for other defenders. But once more we will save it from the barbarians of to-day, and it is this very civilisation which will cry for help from us. We are ready.”

This prophecy did not please Thomassin, who replied,—

“The companions of Attila were gorged when they retreated before you. The barbarians of to-day—I understand that you mean our dear working classes—have empty stomachs. I fear that their ears will not be slower to open than those of the Huns.”

“The church was aware long before you of the miseries of the people,” replied the priest. “She fed, clad, and took care of entire populations in the Middle Ages. She taught even soldiers to be beneficent to a degree of self-

abnegation. Which of you, oh, philanthropists of this century, will enjoy the popularity of a Saint Martin?"

The apostle decidedly was not ready to accept any established glory. With a gesture he signified that he wished for himself something better in the way of popularity.

"I understand that Saint Martin is not your man," said Montgodfroy, sarcastically. "He only gave half of his mantle,—a fine thing to do; but in order to satisfy the modern school he would have to cut his very horse in two. Everybody would profit by it, the horse especially; wouldn't he, Monsieur Thomassin?"

"Will you allow me to say a word?" asks the champion of the modern school. "I am too loyal to deny religious philanthropy, but it has only one form,—alms-giving, always alms, always the abasement of human dignity. Martyrdom or beggary, it is the choice which stands out before those who listen to you."

"It is you and your friends who have implanted this desperate bitterness in their hearts. Christ made the poor the creditors of the rich long before you sought to have the same law voted by your public assemblies. When we, the poor,—for I have the honour of being poor, monsieur,—when we receive alms, it is only a debt that you pay us."

"A convenient debt! The bailiffs do not

annoy the lucky debtor," continued Thomassin.

"How can you say that? If he is a Christian, two relentless bailiffs harass his sleep. One is called Conscience; the other, still more insatiable, is called Love!"

Everybody listened to this eloquence, which was born of conviction, but among them no one admired the speaker as much as Mademoiselle de Louarn. In the midst of a silence, the Marquis de Villegarde said to him, smiling,—

"My poor friend, you have paid for your convictions, for these two bailiffs in question have made you sleep on straw."

"After having dispossessed you of your house, I can speak knowingly, since I bought it," added La Houssaye.

"Oh, do not pity me," said the priest, gaily. "This evening I am benefiting by the Divine Socialist's words: 'But when thou makest a feast, call the poor.' But it seems to me this is a rather serious conversation for a dinner of Saint Hubert."

They all understood that the priest wished to fall in the background, and Ferréol turned the conversation on the incidents of the day. After dinner, Abbé Esminjeaud followed the men to the voluntary exile of their cigars.

"I do not smoke," said he, replying to a jeering remark of Thomassin's, "but I am coquettish

in my way. My black cassock is too great a contrast to the toilettes of some of these ladies."

"You mean," retorted Thomassin, "to their corsages. That is one of the cruelties of the Church. It obliges you to live among women, but forbids you to have a wife. Ah, monsieur, the celibacy of priests; what a question."

"Who poses the question? Those who know nothing of our lives. Those who are in ignorance of the overflowing joy, the supernatural delight which inundates each one of our days, even beneath the ice of old age, when the God of Love is born in our hands, when we speak to Him. I assure you that all the rest appears to us but a trifle."

"A trifle, a trifle," growled Thomassin. "In spite of that, there are some falls in the priesthood."

"Twenty times fewer than in the world," said the abbé. "It is much easier to keep sacerdotal chastity than the marriage vow."

"Eh! the dickens!" exclaimed Montgodfroy. "It is you who ought to tell us that, when you perform the marriage ceremony. But when we are on our *Prie-dieus* you preach to us of conjugal fidelity, like the doctors who talk of sunshine to the consumptives whom they send to Nice. One would imagine that after quitting Toulon it never rained."

The Marquis de Villegarde, pointing to Adrien and Fernand, winked, and added,—

“My dear Honoré, think of these young fellows whom the *Prie-dieu* claims; you must not discourage them. As for you, Monsieur Thomasin, I suppose that you find the world too badly arranged to wish to prevent its coming to an end.”

The person referred to looked silently into space. In truth, this “grand seigneur” exasperated him with his cautious banter and correct jokes. Montgodfroy, evidently animated by his argument, continued in spite of the advice.

“Well, I only wish I was a priest for just five minutes, just sufficient time to deliver a sermon on marriage; there would not be the stereotyped blessing, I can assure you. To the husband, I should say: My son, you are what one calls a *coureur*; I do not say more because of the sanctity of the place. You, my daughter, are frivolous, coquettish, hungering for admiration. You have done your best to see and to hear—and you have seen and heard. Now, for some reason which it is not my business to inquire into, you, my son, and you, my daughter, wish that I unite you two for life. It is a pleasure that I have not the right to refuse you, even if I wished it. But I do not wish it, although I prefer to be in my place rather than in yours. So, my children, you are going to swear to what you do know—and even to what

you do not know. Many will tell you that to be virtuous is easy with God's assistance. I am too honest to allow you to believe it. Conjugal fidelity is contrary to nature; it is contrary to the habits of the world; it is contrary to the former habits of one of you; contrary to the examples divined by the other. But there are miracles, in other words, marriages without any breach of loyalty, and we, here assembled together, are going to pray the Lord to deign to perform one of these miracles in the present case. It will not be quite the first that I have witnessed out of the several hundred marriages that I have blessed. Let us wager, abbé, that you do not preach such sermons. But, seriously, is not the question insolvable?"

"Quite so," replied the priest; "except, like the great Social question, through love and conscience, that is to say, through Christ. Besides, what is the famous war of Labour against Capital? It is an unhappy couple who are always quarrelling; that is all."

At these words he took leave of his host and the masculine guests of the smoking-room, escorted by La Houssaye, who pretended he wished for a little walk. As long as the lights of the château were in sight the two companions remained silent. It was only under the shadow of the first trees in the forest that Abbé Esminjeaud asked him,—

“Why are you so taciturn this evening? Your manner does not please me. What is weighing upon you? anxiety, sorrow, or only the blue devils?”

“It is something more,” said Adrien. “It is hunger, it is thirst, it is fever, it is the anguish of a sentence on which my life is at stake; it is the hope of a heaven that I do not deserve; it is the terror of a hell against which even innocence cannot protect me. In one word, it is love. At last I have been able to speak. At this hour I understand the boon of confession.”

“So much the better, my friend. However, I will reply to you as did Friar Laurent to Romeo: ‘I should prefer a confession with fewer enigmas.’ I know you too well, moreover, to think it is simply the question of some Rosalind.”

“No; but a Juliet who is much longer in responding than the heroine of Shakespeare.”

“Do I know her?” asked the priest, with a joyous emotion in his voice.

“You dined opposite to her just now.”

“Opposite to her? but then—it is not, great heavens! Can it be Mademoiselle de Louarn?”

“Alas, yes! I am audacious enough, perhaps unfortunate enough, to love her.”

The darkness prevented him from seeing the line of bitterness around the abbé’s mouth. As he sighed, Adrien asked,—

“Why do you also seem to pity me?”

"I, also? But you said that I was the first to whom you had confessed this love."

"Another has guessed it: Ferréol, and, like you, he sighed."

"And no doubt, like myself, he was struck by your depressed spirits."

"Ah! my heart is heavy with anxiety. She has altered since yesterday; she is no longer the same woman; because of what? of whom? But it is not intended that a priest should understand certain anguishes which, moreover, he disdains."

"Undeceive yourself. When a storm upsets the human heart or agitates its waves, it is never a spectacle to be disdained. The ocean and the human heart approach nearer the Infinite than any other created thing."

"God ought to be prouder for having made one such woman than to have created worlds. She possesses everything that I have ever dreamed of in the feminine being,—beauty, descent, all the sublime qualities that constitute nobility."

"But what matters the nobility to you?" said the abbê, with a sort of vexation; "you are not noble?"

"Far from it. But for me love is a prostration. It seems to me I could not love my equal."

"That is chivalrous, but dangerous. May heaven guide you. And now let us part. A dress suit and patent-leather shoes are scarcely

suitable for crossing the woods at such an hour."

In the corner of the salon at Villegarde Fernand was cleverly paving his way to the heart and millions of Louise. To tell the truth, Mademoiselle Montgodfroy appeared to listen with distraction to the sentimental talk of the officer, even to Antoinette's gossip. After a little while she rose, declaring that she was completely worn out with fatigue, and took leave of the guests. Fernand whispered a few words in his sister's ear, who almost immediately retired.

"The little girls are going to bed," said Martha. "At last we shall be able to talk nonsense."

But if any one talked nonsense during the evening it was surely not Adrien La Houssaye, to whom the salon appeared a void when he returned.

CHAPTER X.

LITTLE girls, even grown-up ones, are not always to be believed when they declare they are tired out. Antoinette, robed in a comfortable peignoir knocked at a neighbouring door.

"Come in," said a remarkably sweet voice.

Mademoiselle Montgodfroy, who expected her maid, stood up, greatly surprised to see her

friend, and discreetly hid the rosary which she had in her hand. Antoinette saw it, however.

"You are more pious than I," said she. "I am mortified to have disturbed you. But we came to no conclusion respecting our projects for to-morrow. You know, of course, there is to be no hunt."

"I know it, and I will take this opportunity to pay an early visit to the good curé of Mornière. Perhaps it would amuse you to come with me?"

"Yes, certainly it would; you are very fond of him?"

"I have not a better friend, and yet we scarcely see each other. Now and then he comes to pay a visit to the old house which he has sold——"

"To Monsieur La Houssaye. I have breakfasted there. I know its history. Of course the Abbé Esminjeaud does not go to Mûrier without calling at Saint Urbain. Perhaps he is your confessor."

"Oh, only for serious cases," said Louise, smiling.

"The time for serious cases, in other words, serious resolutions, has not yet come," said Antoinette. "How old are you? Eighteen?"

"I shall be this winter."

Mademoiselle de Louarn dropped into an arm-chair, and continued in an unconstrained manner,—

“So my brother has won his bet. The other day we were discussing your age. You must know I very often speak of you with him.”

“I am a poor subject of conversation.”

“That is not our opinion. I must even tell you that my brother accuses me of envying you. But that is not true. I do not envy you, for you have the misfortune to be rich. In such circumstances, were you to hear words of love, how could you tell whether they were sincere or not?”

“I have never heard any,” said Louise, gravely.

“But, at your age, you risk hearing them almost any minute.”

“How do you know?”

“Well, let us pretend that I have the gift of second sight,” said Antoinette, laughing. “I am a Breton, you know.”

Louise turned towards her companion a singularly thoughtful look, then, weighing each of her words, she said,—

“Well, if you are clairvoyant, and if you foresee that a young man is going to tell me that he loves me, you must also see that he will lose his time.”

She was silent, and then, after a short reflection, as though emboldened, she added,—

“But how do you know that I also do not possess second sight? I foresee that a young man *loves you*, and that he will tell you soon, if he has not done so already. I hope that you do not

mind my speaking of these things? It is not I who commenced the subject."

"No," said Antoinette. "I do not resent it."

It was her turn, now, to stare at Louise, who flushed, then paled, and grew nervous beneath the look of a true woman, more experienced in the storms of life. After a few seconds, she got up.

"I do not love Monsieur La Houssaye," said she, in a clear and distinct voice. "On that let us try to sleep. I will be ready to accompany you to-morrow."

After her departure, Mademoiselle Montgodfroy heaved a deep sigh of relief, caused by what she had just heard. Then, after a long reverie, still very sad in spite of all, she collected her thoughts anew and continued her prayers.

The next day, about ten, the young girls, with the governess, mounted a vehicle, which the English call a "governess cart," Louise taking the reins. They started for La Mornière, while Ferréol cried out,—

"Well, out of the four, there is at least one reasonable one, and that is the pony."

Moutonne understood that she could take it leisurely to the great satisfaction of the governess, who watched the copse closely in the hope of seeing a stag bound forth. In the absence of a stag, the mere sight of a rabbit caused her to utter a cry of joy. The young girls were more

fastidious in their tastes, as became true huntresses, and were speaking of the Abbé Esminjeaud.

"Ten years ago," explained Mademoiselle Montgodfroy, "la Mornière was only a hamlet without a church, a deprivation hardly regretted, considering that its people were true heathens. Now you are going to see a charming Roman chapel and a nice-looking presbytery, so far as the exterior is concerned, for it is not furnished. We shall have to sit on empty boxes. Both presbytery and church the abbé has built with his own money, and that is the reason why Monsieur La Houssaye dwells at Mûrier."

"A charming house, is it not?" said Antoinette.

"I know nothing about it," sighed Louise. "Its new owner invited me several times with mamma when he first came here. But I was always left at Saint Urbain. Little girls are such a nuisance. Moreover, mamma has not been there for ages. She says that in a bachelor's house one always fancies that one is in an inn."

Surely the pony was not to blame for "la belle Martha's" sulkiness, yet she received a lash of the whip, the first since her departure, which made her trot lively. Five minutes later they pulled up at the presbytery. A little, stout, red-faced man, disagreeable in appearance, was

superintending the unloading of a cart of furniture.

“What a sly boots this abbé is,” said Louise. “He has bought furniture and has said nothing about it.”

The little man seemed to take great pleasure in this reflection. With his hat on the back of his head, his hands thrust in his pockets, and the insolent leer of a scoundrel, he asked,—

“These young ladies wish——?”

“To see Monsieur le Curé. Is he at home?” murmured the young girl, strangling her indignation.

“Look in the sacristy,” answered the boor. “There you will get some information.”

And as the cart was turning towards the church, he exchanged some low jokes with the porters.

Seated on a stool, the abbé was reading in the narrow building adjoining the sanctuary.

He stood up, cheered at once by the sight of his visitors.

“What an agreeable surprise!”

“It is a day of surprises,” said Louise. “What are they doing at your house?”

“At my house? Alas! I no longer have a house. My presbytery has been seized and sold by order of the Court. What can I do? As a curé I am not worth much, but as a business man I am dreadful. I build and build; I sign

notes; I sign everything that is put before me provided the masons may work, and one fine day I am expelled. It seems to me that I shall never be able to keep a roof over my head. Never mind. Do not pity me. For the moment I am the good Lord's tenant."

He pointed smilingly to a coarse curtain, behind which they guessed there was a mattress on the floor.

"*Mon Dieu!*" said Louise, with moistened eyes; "and you said nothing to my uncle?"

"I did not think that things would be so rushed. And then I feared that Monsieur le Marquis would be extravagant. I have cost him so much already. Indeed, it is nothing; and, thank God, my church is paid for."

"Ah, these miserable people! They will force you to go away."

"No, indeed; I have no dealings with them, since the parish is not yet established. The Funds of public worship ignore me; one person alone could force me to go away, and that is my bishop."

"Your bishop, your bishop, and if you die of hunger?"

"You know well that I shall not die of hunger," answered the priest, casting a knowing look at Louise. "I receive charity for my poor, and I am indelicate enough to share it with them."

Antoinette, who seemed overwhelmed with surprise, had not spoken, finally she said,—

“What an example for souls that are seeking an Ideal! Here is a confessor of the faith.”

“What conception have you of the priesthood?” replied the abbé, almost severely. “In truth, I expected some thorns in my pathway; indeed, I did not hope for the happiness that I have found in this life. Saturday I was obliged to leave my house. It was too luxurious. God has punished me. The following day three men attended mass, under protest, perhaps, more than by conviction. Be that as it may, I have never had so many men in my church at one time since it was opened. But one must have been a missionary in order to comprehend this joy.”

“No,” said Mademoiselle de Louarn. “I understand it, and I ask myself if I in my life will ever know so great a joy.”

“You were speaking of souls who seek the Ideal,” replied the abbé. “Have you not found yours yet, you, the daughter of Pierre de Louarn, the fervent Christian?”

“For the life to come I trust in God,” said Antoinette, “but for this one,—I am a woman. I can fight with neither the sword nor the pen like my father, nor preach the gospel like you.”

The blue eyes of Mademoiselle Montgodfroy swept the ceiling. The curé asked her with a smile, as though he knew better,—

“And you, my child, have you found your Ideal?”

“Oh, yes,” she replied, confidently; “my ideals are found, for, not being a saint, I need a first one for this world. But may we not visit the church?”

They had only to pass through the door which separated the sacristy from the choir. The oak reredos framed a rather fine picture, a gift from the marquis, representing the martyrdom of the “*Quatre Couronnés*,” patron saint of the stone-workers, for stone cutting was the principal industry of the place. While Antoinette and the governess were listening to the legend, passably obscure it must be admitted, Louise was descending the nave and approached a statue of the Virgin for which she had a great devotion. It was not that the Madonna thus far had worked miracles, but Louise, having paid for this effigy, was supposed to have the privilege of obtaining special graces. Perhaps she was asking one in particular, for she drew from her pocket a blue ribbon, to which was attached a gold medallion. Certain of not being seen, she mounted a chair and nimbly passed the votive offering around the neck of the Virgin. She then kneeled down and said a prayer. Claspings her hands tightly together, and laying a stress on the words in a sort of despair which brought the tears to her eyes, she murmured, “One has

never, never, *never* heard of a person being forsaken who has had recourse to you."

Nevertheless, the holy Virgin of Mornière was submitted to a severe test for her *début*. Louise thought so, indeed, as she joined her companions who were hanging on the lips of the abbé. As half-past eleven struck, the governess declared that it was time to start if they wished to be at the château for breakfast.

"But you, poor Monsieur le Curé," said Antoinette, "where will you breakfast now?"

"Don't disturb yourself. I have only to make my choice among the invitations even from very poor parishioners, and those who are least suspected of clericalism. Human nature is better than we think, after all."

It will be seen that the Abbé Esminjeaud was not of those who are embittered by difficulties.

CHAPTER XI.

THE hunt was renewed on the following day. This time a young stag was selected, the marquis wishing to test the endurance of his equipage, beasts and men.

As might be expected, it was a hard day. Without doubling, the animal, trusting to its speed, darted with the fleetness of an arrow to

the great woods. Pushed very quickly, at first he grew bewildered and rushed through the streets of Nemours, crossing the road, the railroad, and canal. In the woods of the Commanderie the scent was lost. By this time only a small number of riders, including the intrepid Antoinette, were following. Madame Montgodfroy, Louise, Adrien—still faithful to his post—and Fernand—now decidedly in a bad humour—all formed a rear-guard reinforced by the breaks, in which to-day were seen Thomassin and the banker. But after leaving Nemours—in other words, after three leagues—these easy-going sportsmen gave up the hunt upon La Houssaye's advice, who said,—

“The marquis wanted a hard run. Well, he may count upon having it. Gracious knows how far this stag may lead him. As for ourselves, it would be folly to go farther, as we are so far behind.”

Villegarde, however, had put the hounds on the right scent. He was radiant and galloped as vigorously as he had done fifteen years ago; but, no matter what the pace or the obstacle, he always heard behind or beside him Elphin's hoofs, whose rider seemed to defy falls, and even death itself.

In the groves of Franchart the pack abandoned the scent. It was two o'clock, and it was necessary to go back some seven or eight leagues, and

this time there was no ammunition waggon at hand. Ferréol, seeing that the dogs were rallied, left his huntsmen to clear things up, and, accompanied by Mademoiselle de Louarn, he reached a lodge where he knew he should be able to get an omelette and the shelter of a roof.

When they were seated at table beneath the rustic beams of the best room, the marquis said to the beautiful rider, who no longer wore her impenetrable mask,—

“Your fearlessness and energy are remarkable. But you will kill yourself some day in trying to follow me.”

“And suppose I do kill myself?” she asked, with a flash in her eyes. “Would you regret me?”

For a few seconds Ferréol seemed to read those eyes, which were not lowered. This hero of so many love adventures knew too much of the language of a woman’s eyes to be deceived. In a grave or rather paternal voice he answered,—

“My dear child, should you die, it would be a shame only to be regretted by an old man. It would not be difficult to be wept for by eyes more youthful.”

“No; it is in your eyes that I should like to see tears, at least one tear, on the day you hear that I am dead.”

Who now would have found Antoinette’s beauty cold?

“Come,” said Villegarde, “I see that Elphin’s gallop has rather turned this pretty head.”

“Why not say simply that I am mad? I do not think, however, that I am.”

“You are not mad, but you are only unhappy. Unhappiness has many names, and I am in ignorance what to call yours. Will you allow me to question you as though you were Faust and I was—which I am not—Mephistopheles?”

“Well, go on.”

“Surely it is not either youth or beauty that you lack. But a beauty like yours requires a frame; do you covet wealth?”

“I have suffered less from poverty than from the solitude which dries up my heart. And soon, like Goethe’s hero, I shall deplore the loss of youth.”

“Are you blind, then? Do you not see love and riches lying at your feet—what do I say? they implore you. A young man is dead to the world since he has met you.”

“Oh!” she cried, hiding her face in her hands; “you regard me only as a girl on the point of becoming an old maid and who is looking for a husband. Great heavens! at least I had hoped for some words that I could cherish in my memory; instead, you tell me where I can find a husband. Come, let us go; I want to leave this

place. I should like to hide myself,—how disgraceful !”

She stood up, forgetting her luncheon, scarcely tasted. In a curt voice she called for her horse. The forester, greatly astonished, scarcely concealing the malicious thought which was revealed in his shrewd eyes, brought up the two steeds. A moment later the hero of this singular idyl was trotting on the road to Villegarde, while an ominous silence reigned.

By the time they reached the château, Antoinette's pride had gotten to windward. Resolved in the first moment to seize a pretext for leaving the following day, she saw that this abrupt departure would not throw dust in the eyes of either her father, brother, or the Montgodfroys. She resolved to be stronger than her madness; for Villegarde had judged her rightly,—she had been momentarily insane. At dinner she assumed an appearance of gaiety. She conversed with Thomassin on her literary aspirations, hanging on his words as on an oracle, pretending admiration for the boldness of the principles which he expressed. She talked only with him. The marquis was dull, an unusual occurrence: Montgodfroy chaffed him,—

“ *Une retraite manquée.* That is a catastrophe. Stocks will fall to-morrow.”

“ Certain catastrophes do not cause stocks to fall,” replied Ferréol, without smiling.

The next morning a break carried quite a goodly number of travellers to the station. Montgodfroy and Pierre de Louarn went to Paris, one for business, the other for his lectures. Louise and the governess were taking the same train, sent to the city by "la belle Martha" to execute commissions. Antoinette accompanied her father and Louise, she herself being escorted by Adrien and Fernand. In the meanwhile Thomassin was at work in the library, at least it was there that they had left him.

A young officer from Fontainebleau, a comrade of Lieutenant de Louarn, happened to be in the train.

"Come and breakfast at mess," he cried. "Jump in quickly."

They were closing the doors; Fernand sprang in.

"Well, and I," said Antoinette. "Here I am alone now!"

"Mademoiselle," said Adrien, "since you have no chaperon, I will leave you the carriage and return on foot."

"What childishness," said Pierre de Louarn. "Go, get in together."

And the train started. No one noticed the expression of despair in Louise's eyes.

Some minutes before, La Houssaye, in the profound bitterness of his heart, had given up all hope of ever having a conversation with his cold

idol. Startled at first by this unexpected piece of luck which accident had thrown in his way, he soon braced himself up, realising that he must, at all costs, sound the depths of this mysterious anguish that weighed upon him and the future. In the drive from the château to the station, Antoinette had almost ignored his presence. Why this unwonted reserve? Was she thinking of some one? Thomassin, perhaps, as he was the only man who had spoken three times to this sphinx for several weeks.

Adrien was too young to look upon a man of fifty-five as a possible rival for him.

With good horses the distance from the station to Villegarde would take twenty minutes. So he must not waste time; fortunately, the noise of the wheels and the bells on the harness would prevent their voices from reaching the postillion and footman, seated high on the box. Mastering, with difficulty, his emotion, La Houssaye said,—

“Do you remember our last *tête-à-tête*? It was at Meaux, and that day I saw you smile. Now, it seems to me that I am plunged in the darkness of a Polar night, for you never smile. Tell me, Majesty, what can I do to make you happy?”

Antoinette answered,—

“It is true, I am an ingrate. But why do you love me?”

He uttered a cry of joy, and, clasping his hands, he said,—

“Ah, you know that I love you, cruel but all-powerful queen! Yes, it is a madness; I know it. Forgive me. What matters to you if the dream of a slave has leaped all obstacles, has passed invisible, through the grade of rank, and stripped off in its audacity the crown of your beauty?”

“You must, indeed, have been dreaming,” she said, touched, in spite of herself, “to see me so different from what I am. Look at me well; you will find that I am only a woman like all others. You have loved some, no doubt, who were worth a hundred of me.”

“No, I have never loved anyone. One might say that I *felt* you come into my life. And, now, that you are there, you will remain,—as a torture, probably. There is no hope for my love?”

“For heaven’s sake, do not question me!”

“Anything is better than this uncertainty, and then, if it is my presence that puts this flash of anger in your eyes, I must go away.”

Antoinette collected herself instantly. She looked at the tops of the great oaks, still clad in verdure; one after another was lost in the midst of a November fog, which draped the woods like a great wet shroud. She was astonished, almost irritated, to hear a man speak to her of love, amidst this desolation of nature and of her own heart. A vague need of not being the only one to suffer made her cruel, and she thus answered,—

"In my bitterness, you count for nothing. The truth is, that I love some one, and without hope."

"Without hope, my God! Is he not free, then? It is not——"

La Houssaye withheld the name of Thomassin, which was on his lips. Was it possible that Antoinette de Louarn could love, "without hope," this pedant, who was full of himself? She continued,—

"The man I love is free, but he does not deem me worthy of even a thought. And shall I tell you the advice that he gave me? Go, marry my friend La Houssaye!"

"What! is it Villegarde, then? Ah, this is the last blow; he is sacrificing himself for me!"

"No," said Antoinette, with a pitiless smile. "He sacrifices nothing. Besides, why do you not speak to him? he will tell you the truth."

"And, if he tells me that he does not love you, would you still refuse to be my wife?"

Her eyes flashed beneath her contracted brows. She said,—

"Don't tempt me; that would save my pride. To a woman like myself the offer is alluring."

"Accept it, then."

"Perhaps I might be capable of this cowardice, but I am too loyal to take you at your word. Mind, I cannot, I will not, forget Villegarde."

"Let me, then, suffer with you. Allow me to wait one year, ten years, all my life. Who knows when the hour will come that you can forget Villegarde—and love me!"

"Take care; perhaps it is an endless martyrdom that you would accept."

"Ah, this *perhaps*, that you say, is enough for me. It is like a golden ray in the misty dawn. The sun will shine, perhaps, before the close of the day."

"What sort of a man are you, then?" said she, astonished. "I fear that I am a monster."

"No; you have hidden nothing. You are loyal, and I feel that you will always be so."

"Yes, that, certainly. I would kill myself rather than be false."

"So then I have your promise?"

Adrien spoke like a man ill and in a delirium, without a gesture or inflection of the voice. But his eyes which devoured Antoinette sufficed to show his passion. She was frightened by it, and suddenly grew calm.

"Let us collect ourselves," said she, after a short silence. "We are both of us passing through a fit of madness. Perhaps one day you will curse me should I profit by the exaltation you are now in. Listen to me. I impose one year of probation. At the end of this time, should you offer me the engagement ring, I swear to accept it. But I exact one condition.

This very day the marquis must know from you of this conversation."

A gesture from Adrien showed his suffering. Mademoiselle de Louarn continued: "What do you imagine? that I hope for a change in his feelings? No, I am not an imbecile. I know quite well that the marquis will congratulate you without an after-thought of regret for himself. But I insist that he shall know all. Then, for one year or for always, you will forget, and to the world we shall remain only as ordinary friends."

"I will obey you," said Adrien. "You are a most noble woman. Will you not give me your hand?" He kissed her glove, and almost immediately they stopped at the steps of Villegarde. As Antoinette was gaining her room, La Housaye asked for the marquis. He was told that he was in the pavilion of the Venery.

Ferréol was listening to the reports of his gamekeepers, but was especially examining the demands for indemnity which poured upon him every morning.

"There!" said he, when the audience was finished. "Such is the life led by the seigneur of to-day. Instead of hanging their vassals, as in the legends, they give them their money to escape being summoned before the justice of the peace. And we are accused of continuing the oppression. How I envy you not to be a landed proprietor!"

"Do not envy me until I have told you what brought me. Can we talk quietly in this den?"

"More so than elsewhere. But what have you to tell me, for you are livid."

"I am going to relate a very simple story. I have just come from the station. I was all alone in the carriage with Mademoiselle de Louarn. Taking advantage of this *tête-à-tête*, I proposed to her."

"That was rather English," observed the marquis, with a visible shuddering. "But, after all, this young girl is not an ordinary person."

"I should say not," said Adrien, without a smile. "At all events, she accepts me."

Villegarde did not say one word! His strong face bore a look of disapprobation, but betrayed no self-sacrificing struggle. Adrien quickly resumed,—

"Do not judge her severely, even for one second. I am here by her command."

He related the scene which had just taken place.

"Indeed," concluded Ferréol, after a moment; "the situation is uncommon. But our friendship is strong enough to stand it. More so, as, thank heaven, I do not love Mademoiselle de Louarn. What shall I say to you? A woman-hater would burst into invectives. For myself, who love and defend women, I only see an excess of loyalty in this young person. Frankness for frankness, is it not? Were you my son, I would

do my best that the engagement ring should remain at the jeweller's. Not that this strange creature is unworthy of you, but she is not the one I should have chosen for your wife. Being only your friend, I must remain neutral. On my honour, and you can tell her so if you wish, I will not move a finger to change your sentiments towards her; and now may God help you."

"Amen!" said Adrien, with a sigh. "But I will tell her nothing; it is useless. She knows you, and trusts in your delicacy as *gentilhomme*. You esteem her, don't you?"

"With all my heart. Allow me to add that I pity her. Alas! she is not the only one to be pitied."

Believing that these last words referred to himself, La Houssaye drew himself up and said,—

"That is too much, marquis. I admit that one man in the world has not the right to envy me, and this man is yourself; but if you wish that our friendship should stand this trial, do not pity me, but rather say you congratulate me."

"Well, then, I congratulate you, my friend."

Speaking thus, Ferréol sighed, thinking to himself how certain invitations, given with the idea of pleasing his grandniece, had turned out. Poor Louise! . . .

At this moment the breakfast-gong sounded, and it may be believed that neither of the two

interlocutors cursed it, seeing the turn the conversation had taken. The company at table was reduced to five persons, and at first they were silent. Villegarde and Adrien seemed greatly preoccupied. "La belle Martha" observed it, scenting something new in the air. Antoinette, nervous and excited, evidently needed to give vent to her agitation. With a visible determination, she urged Thomassin to discuss the questions up to now carefully avoided beneath the roof of Villegarde. It might be believed that she was aiming to outrage the tastes, instincts, and traditions of the marquis.

Too sensible not to understand, and at the same time too generous not to excuse, the latter maintained a silence which threw Thomassin off his guard. The Apostle, inspired by his new catechumen, rode his favourite hobby, social iniquity, and pointed out the remedies, or, to be more correct, his remedy, with more freedom than he had ever displayed before Ferréol. He grew eloquent, with that easy eloquence of men who deplore evils too real, and who have no leader capable of bringing them back to practical conclusions. Far from contradicting him, Antoinette approved, or at least tolerated, some ideas that even Pierre de Louarn would never have been able to admit. But he was not there to draw the line which separated the Christian Socialism from the other. His daughter, as she

listened to the plans, anything but Christian, of the reform to come, nodded her head and remarked,—

“These are indeed very curious theories.”

La Houssaye sat as though lost in a dream, his eyes alone showing activity, feigning to eat, seeking vainly for a glance from Antoinette. Somewhat irritated at this slave’s abnegation, who took no interest in anything, the marquis addressed Adrien, and said,—

“And you, my tactiturn friend, do you find these theories curious?”

“I!” said the lover, with a start; “well, I find it quite natural that one speaks to me of the happiness of others. I only regret that no one cares for mine.”

“Your happiness is assured,” said Thomassin. “What do you lack?”

In a voice which seemed to come from a very weary man, Adrien answered,—

“Allow me to declare, once for all, your grandiloquent phrases make me smile. Why do you only pity one-half of humanity, and always the same? This partiality makes me jealous. I assure you that there are some beings who neither suffer from cold, hunger, nor thirst; who sleep in a good bed, who do not work even eight hours a day, and yet whose misery surpasses the trials of the most wretched of our workmen. Is it not time that you did something for these

beings? And, if you are powerless, why am I bound to admire you?"

When they had returned to the salon, Thomassin said, in a low voice, to Madame Montgodfroy,—

"What is the matter with this handsome mystery? One would say that he had been rejected."

"Perhaps you make him jealous?" replied "la belle Martha;" "his Infanta has ears only for you."

"You know my project. It is women like her and like you, not the meetings of the starved, who pull down the old fortress."

Only one more hunt took place before the breaking up of the first house-party. While on the way to the meet, Antoinette said, in quite a loud voice, to Madame Montgodfroy,—

"This morning I shall keep you company. It is our last day, and time I showed myself more sociable."

Indeed, no one would have recognised the fearless rider of a few days ago. She remained, until the death of the stag, with Madame Montgodfroy, her daughter, Fernand, and Adrien. She spoke little, and seemed very content when they retook, at an early hour, the road to Villegarde. In the evening, the dinner counted many guests, and there was the quarry by torchlight.

When the horns had sounded the *bon soir*, and the torches were extinguished, the marquis approached Antoinette, to whom he had scarcely spoken during the day. Offering her his arm, in order to quit the terrace, he said,—

“You would have preferred other musicians than my huntsmen, this evening, other actors than my bow-wows; it can be read on your face; you have been bored in this desert. But a poor gentleman-hunter can only give what he has.”

She looked down at the flagstones, and said,—

“On the contrary, I will never forget this scene. Where find a more finished drama? A day’s hunt is often the image of certain destinies; you awake like the poor stag, only asking to be happy. Like a pack of hounds, fatality comes on your scent; it pursues, it overtakes you, and you disappear whilst some man goes to sleep, saying to himself, ‘The day was interesting, it will begin again to-morrow.’ To-morrow, I shall be far from here.”

She made no allusion to Adrien of their hypothetical engagement, only saying, just as she was entering the carriage,—

“Will you caress Elphin for me, and try to make him pardon me?”

“What can he have to pardon you for? At the most, for having ridden too quickly?”

“First that, and then for having been an ingrate to his master.”

“Ah,” said the young man, closing his eyes to hide their flash, “be what you like : I adore you.”

Thus the persons of this story went their way : Louarn and his daughter to Paris, where projects, still mysterious, detained the Christian socialist; Fernand resumed his duty at Meaux, and his matrimonial projects, in a way, everywhere; Thomassin returned to his dinners at a *prix fixe*, and to his cheap cigars. As to Louise Montgodfroy, she had returned with her governess to the majestic solitude of Saint Urbain, where every evening her father came and joined her.

At last they had a good time at Villegarde. A new party of guests, sportsmen, elegant and gay, formed a court round “la belle Martha,” and “it was possible to talk,” now that the young girls had gone away; and Heaven knows they did talk, but no longer of Socialism.

The one who amused himself least was Adrien. On the hunting days, he galloped like mad behind the pack, and seemed to seek fatigue. If the hounds remained in the kennel, this gloomy young man was not to be seen. He ranged the woods or visited the Abbé Esminjeaud, encamped with his bed, table, and two chairs in a peasant's cottage, the rent of which was paid by Louise. Frequently, Adrien passed half a day in Paris, which somewhat injured his reputation as a virtuous man, and exposed him

to some coarse jokes, in which the marquis never took part. Since a certain explanation, he was careful in his manner to Adrien. The latter, however, without wishing or knowing it, perhaps, was no longer quite the same.

So true is it that one golden or brown hair weighs heavily in the balance against the strongest chains of human affection.

CHAPTER XII.

IN the meanwhile Pierre de Louarn's friends, whom he had left in Brittany, were wondering at his protracted absence. All was explained, however, when they heard that he had accepted the editorship of a great newspaper, founded by a "groupe" decidedly heterogeneous as to the basis of their ideas. This "groupe" was composed of Monarchists, who were *ralliés*, for a good or bad motive, Clericaux,* who, confounded by various disagreements among their leaders, were like unto a sick man who, seeing his doctors in dispute, forthwith resolves to become his own physician. There were likewise some de-

* In France, Clericaux are men who make a special pretence of asserting and defending their religious ideas in their public or political career.

feated Conservatives, who, condemned to a long rest, had begun to feel cramps in their legs; certain ambitious men accustomed to take a ticket in every lottery; some dreamers who follow any path, and devotees who light a taper before every shrine. There were, too, some saints thirsting for the salvation of souls; some materialists, who occupied themselves with the well-being of the body; some sceptics who, frightened at the speed of the train, wished to back the engine. Last, but not least, there was Pierre de Louarn, the old soldier of Castelfidardo and Loigny, too courageous to fear an adversary, too loyal to suspect treason, but who was always ready to shake any hand extended to him, save when he saw in this hand the soilure of blackmail and embezzlement.

On the day that Adrien brought the news to Villegarde of the establishment of the "Social Amendment" Madame Montgodfroy declared with a sagacious air,—

"Pierre de Louarn is one of the men who has the power to advance the salvation of society."

"That may be so," said little Madame Lepin, who happened to be present; "but I doubt if he is a man qualified to control a daughter like his."

Ferréol hastened to change the conversation.

When, towards the middle of December, the Montgodfroys opened anew their house, Pierre

de Louarn and his daughter were just completing their temporary installment in a furnished apartment on the left side of the Seine, of which the mere outlook would have given blue devils to a Cornish miner. There, for entire days, crushed beneath the always active wheels of her imagination, Antoinette battled with herself in the crisis which was about to decide her life. She lacked one quality, the absence of which in our times costs so dearly. I mean *resignation*. She had not been resigned to the death of her mother, ten years before. She had not been resigned to her youth deprived of sunshine, nor to her increasing poverty, nor to the paternal failures. Furthermore, she felt disappointed in the indifference, as she thought, that men showed to her beauty, a beauty without smiles, and which commanded admiration rather than submission to its charms. Perhaps she had been still less resigned not to experience love, this joy or sorrow, which so many ugly women had known. And when in a moment of exaltation, more or less real, she had felt the divine arrow pierce her soul, she had encountered not only an icy heart, but icy words as well. She did not realise that, owing to his loyalty and goodness of soul, Villegarde had exaggerated his words. She repeated to herself with great bitterness,—

“And did he imagine that I wanted him to

marry or even to love me? I was beside myself, and it would have gratified me that my hero, found at last, should know of this infatuation if only to pity me; but he—he only laughed at it.” To be just, this was the only folly that she had ever committed in her life. And either to save her pride or to escape the double misery of suffering in solitude, she had promised herself almost cynically to another man. Hence a supreme grief, the suffering of unresigned souls. She no longer had that proud esteem of herself which sustains us against everything.

During these weeks she fretted, seeing only her father in the evenings, and usually in the company of men who discussed their plans and theories, never suspecting that the attention of this tall young girl was merely that of politeness. Nevertheless, she did understand these questions, and they still interested her, but, since she had seen more of people and more of the world, her faith in the result wavered a little. Her brother, younger by a year than herself, gave her no encouragement. He was not resigned, either, and for some time he had given up all hopes of understanding his sister, this living enigma. Moreover, he criticised his father’s theories as well as his line of conduct. He found fault with his enterprise and predicted his total ruin to many of his friends. The officer was very seldom seen in the apartment in the

rue de la Chaise, where he was bored to death when he was not irritated to the point of exasperation. Already, on more than one occasion, in his efforts to assail some fortresses within which were intrenched some big *dots*, he had noticed in certain of these bourgeois fathers a terror more or less concealed; to their ears the name of Louarn sounded like an alarm-bell. Antoinette had put Adrien to the test according to the conditions she had imposed. She had exacted that he should depart for Cannes, and remain as one dead. But he was not dead, to judge by the boxes of flowers, bonbons, and oranges which rained, surely not from heaven, in the gloomy and scarcely royal *entresol* which sheltered her poor "Majesty."

In the meanwhile, Pierre de Louarn, for lack of more practical success, created a great deal of noise. The "Amendment," which an Anarchistic paper had suggested should be called the "Harlequin," in view, no doubt, of its motley staff, was attaining its aim, which was to unite "the efforts" towards a social advancement; but thus far the editor had only succeeded in uniting the efforts of his political enemies against the "Amendment." It received blows on all sides, and from all kinds of weapons. On the left the shower fell on a priest, a noted contributor, more ambitious than the Abbé Esminjeaud. The priest essayed to demonstrate that a cassock is still better

suited to represent the working-classes than the famous blouse of a certain deputy.* Other blows, more delicate, if not less menacing, came from the right and bruised the shoulders, which once had been very pleasing, so affirmed the legend, of an editress signing herself "Renée." Having grown old, "Renée" had turned a sort of sister of charity, which is much like turning hermit. Only, instead of a veil she wore a red flag, and in place of a crucifix, a reporter's badge, which opened many doors to her, even some that are not supposed to turn easily on their sacred hinges under the shadow of Saint Peter's. The *rôle* of this intelligent woman, whether in the "Amendment" or in other sheets less Catholic, was to ventilate all the misfortunes and catastrophes which never happen but a subscription is opened at a newspaper office. As her ventilations were sincere and her hands clean, she collected some money, although she did not always distribute it judiciously. Many persons, Antoinette among them, saw only her good heart, overlooking the rest, and formed a friendship, even an enthusiasm for her. In truth, it was difficult to have a half liking for this generous crank. The Christian Socialist welcomed her

* This refers to a Monsieur Thivrier, a Revolutionary candidate at the Legislative election in 1889, who took his seat in the Chamber of Deputies wearing a blue blouse over his coat.

with pleasure to his house; first, because he admired her, afterwards, because she prevented Antoinette from dying of *ennui*.

Towards Christmas, as usual, the Montgodfroys returned to Parc Monceau. A few days later "la belle Martha" entered the little parlour in the rue de la Chaise, all flowering as a wayside altar.

"Ah," she said, after having kissed the young recluse; "I see that you are not forgotten beneath the palms of Cannes."

"What do you mean? Oh, these roses? Flowers grow in Paris, madame!"

"Nonsense; do you imagine that I cannot tell the difference between a rose from Nice and one from Montrouge? And when will the engagement be announced?"

"You are joking. For heaven's sake leave me the only good thing that I have in my life, —*la libertà—ch' é si cara!*"

"*Chère petite*, when one possesses such eyes as yours, she is the gaoler and not the prisoner. All the same, were I in your place, I should prefer that flowers be brought to me instead of being sent from so far. Cannes is a dangerous place. It is full of Americans, less beautiful than you, perhaps, but more matter of fact, who would be enchanted to mount Elphin."

"I assure you," answered Antoinette, "I would never, never, marry for money."

“Never? Why not imitate the courtier of Louis XIV., to whom the king said, ‘I give you this dish of partridges,’—the silver dish was of beautiful workmanship and of good weight. ‘Is it possible, sire?’ said the shrewd fellow. ‘And the partridges, also?’ *Ma petite*, take the partridge in the bargain, in other words, the love: try to love La Houssaye. He is sufficiently good-looking to occupy for some time the imagination of a woman,—and the dish is of good weight.”

“You think me, then, avaricious; you are wrong. It seems to me it must be wearisome to be rich, or rather to be the wife of a rich man, when one has the misfortune to think too much.”

“Yes, if that husband is named Montgodfroy, not if he is called La Houssaye. You speak as you think, and I believe you. Well, my dear, with wealth you would be able to do more work, and make more noise than twenty statesmen. See the place your new friend ‘Renée’ holds, who has only her pen and her pluck. She would enter the legislative body to-morrow but for our blessed laws. You, *ma belle*, could have one of those salons where ministers are made, and—ministers make laws.”

“You speak as though I was fond of politics,” said Antoinette; “the truth is that they disgust me.”

“My child, that which you call politics are fated to die; and it is woman’s hand that will

drown them in the torrent of Social restoration. These words are not mine, but Thomassin's. *Au revoir*. I will send my coupé to-morrow, so that you may come and breakfast with me."

Henceforth there was a change in Antoinette's life, to the great satisfaction of her father, who had not the time to inquire how she spent her hours, two or three times a week, at "la belle Martha's." He fancied that his daughter would meet the little Montgodfroy again. But poor Louise, a constant frequenter of fashionable lectures, ran away at dessert. Thomassin came; sometimes even "Renée," and Mademoiselle de Louarn took some lessons in a theology quite different from that of Saint Thomas.

In the meanwhile, the winter season at Cannes was drawing to a close, and once more there were to be seen many people who had fled the boulevard at the first snow-fall. Adrien, among the foremost to arrive, frequently appeared at the Montgodfroys, sure of meeting Antoinette there. The disagreeable part was that, in order to enjoy the fish, he was obliged to swallow the sauce of Thomassin and "Renée." But his ever-burning passion enabled him to overlook everything. He would sit apart and gaze at "his queen," avoiding, faithful to his word, all semblance of the attentions of a suitor. Besides, he never doubted the loyalty of Mademoiselle de Louarn. His suffering consisted in seeing the days drag by so

slowly; but he counted them without anguish, like a condemned man who is sure that his punishment will end at the moment appointed by the judge. Antoinette treated him with a coldness, in which, however, there was a nervousness rather pleasing to him,—for indifference would have been worse.

He was informed that Ferréol was still at his estate of Villegarde, and obviously avoided Paris during the winter. This unwilling rival was trying to make himself forgotten, and even remove all cause for jealousy. To tell the truth, this exile was not a great sacrifice for the marquis. He found his forest the most fascinating of all places; and, to be just, it must be added that Antoinette scarcely regretted this voluntary separation which spared her an embarrassing meeting.

One person alone, even though she said nothing, was unhappy at Ferréol's absence; that was his grandniece. Having no longer the opportunity of speaking, she ended by writing. Her letter is worth reading.

“So you do not come to Paris any more? That is cruel, for with you, at least, I have the comfort of lamenting a little, which is useless, I know; but, all the same, it does one good. The others would laugh at me as at a little girl having ideas beyond her years. It seems as though everyone ignores my age, even those who have

good reason for remembering it. My governess holds me by the arm in the streets for fear of the vehicles, as though I was still at the catechism stage. And I have not a single friend!

“I might have one, I believe, for Mademoiselle de Louarn treats me in the best way, and, like a good Christian, I try to love her. What has happened is not her fault. But, oh! how hard it is to smile at her and give her my hand! Why has she come with her all-conquering beauty? beside which, one no longer looks at me, unless it is at my *dot*. *He* is at her feet, admiring everything, even that which would terrify another. Do you know what is hard, my dear uncle? It is, that she does not love him, and shows it so plainly. Oh, in truth, one cannot accuse her of playing a comedy; it would be impossible to be less intriguing, and for that I can esteem her without being obliged to resort to prayer. As for her, her admiration turns to Seigneur Thomassin, and the one who loves her does not seem to resent it. Great heavens, what is to be done?

“I well know that she admires Monsieur Thomassin only for his mind and ideas; these are too big, as a rule, for my poor little head. But sometimes, however, I understand. Gracious! if I wished to marry a woman, and if I saw this woman listening, approving, and tolerating all that she does, I should ask myself if this would

be a prudent and orthodox companion to give my life to. And still he will marry her, you will see. It is no use for you to tell me that he is too sensible, and it is useless for me to pray and to make vows to the Holy Virgin. Abbé Esminjeaud said to me in November, when I went to confession, 'My child, the Holy Virgin is the gate of Paradise; she is not the ante-chamber to the *Mairie*. She knows better than you the husband who will suit you!' Ah, one is so often deceived! How grateful I should be if the Holy Virgin would allow me to be deceived in accordance with the desire of my heart.

"To sum up, you divine perhaps that your little Louise is not the happiest creature in the world. I have courage in spite of all. I struggle, I work. When I am not at lectures, I remain a good deal in my own room. And no one, you know it, cares whether I leave it or not. I read, but everything turns bitter. Could you believe that I cried this morning when reading of some travels in California? It spoke of how the first miners reached some good ground, planted a stake on which they inscribed their names, and this ground could not be explored by any one else. I had found my ground a long time ago, a good claim rich in pure gold, but I have not been able to post my name on my discovery, and another is victoriously installed there where I had hoped to find my fortune, in other words, my happiness."

This letter moved Ferréol to pity; moreover, he could not always remain at Villegarde, especially after the close of the hunting season. The first leaves were just appearing when he entered his bachelor apartment in Avenue Hoche, and on the following day a *dîner intime* was given in his honour at the Montgodfroys. With delicate attention, the guests of his first party of the autumn before met around the table.

With the exception of the officer, all were present unchanged in appearance, but at the first glance the marquis perceived a marked alteration in Mademoiselle de Louarn.

Without other personal interest than as a diletante of the feminine heart, he was curious to see how this strange girl would welcome him. In this respect he had no cause to complain, for the meeting was banal. Antoinette extended her hand with an ease which exceeded all anticipation. She was still beautiful, but of a less Olympian beauty, and, according to his opinion, less disquieting even for a man not easily disturbed. She spoke louder, with greater gestures. She was more feverish, less queenly. But, above all, her independence of bearing, thoughts, assertions, sometimes surpassed the limits allowed, even by the customs of to-day, to a young and unmarried woman.

To say that she experienced an unqualified joy in seeing Ferréol would, perhaps, be going too

far. But this man, habituated to the most extraordinary changes in the heart of woman, was obliged to admit one thing,—the wound he had caused, if involuntarily, had been healed. To do him justice, Villegarde was delighted to remark it without any reservation to his vanity.

It remained to find out if the physician was Adrien. Before forming his opinion, the marquis awaited the arrival of the young man. When he appeared there was a defiance shining in Antoinette's eyes, and Villegarde experienced at the same moment a chill and a joy. A chill for Adrien, a joy for Louise.

At table they talked a great deal about the last Anarchist offence which was still agitating all Paris. Thomassin spoke little, too intelligent not to see to what such a madness was leading. In "*la belle Martha*" fear began to counter-balance great social theories. One person alone at this table of bourgeois, more or less gloomy, evinced something other than despondency; it was Mademoiselle de Louarn.

"What is most dreadful in this catastrophe," she said, "is the frightful suffering which it indicates; for, in order that a man should reach this extremity, his moral misery must have surpassed all that the imagination can conceive. Perhaps he is as much to be pitied as he is to be blamed."

Montgodfroy, in a very bad humor, said

nothing, but shrugged his shoulders, which offence, scarcely gallant, seemed to shock only Adrien. Louise looked at her uncle as much as to say, "You hear how she speaks." Pierre de Louarn, the hero of several battles, made this observation,—

"What makes me the most anxious in this juncture is the cowardice of the public."

"That is true," said Ferréol; "but out of misfortune comes good. The fear of bombs will be the commencement of wisdom for those among us who wish to revive the ideas of La Fayette. This time we shall have the reign of terror *before* the 'Etats Généraux.' "

"One must not look upon a crank's deed as a political *régime*," remarked Thomassin, sadly.

"The best of the affair is that the man has been caught," said Montgodfroy. "If only the jury do their duty."

"Their duty!" protested Antoinette. "This wretched man has a little daughter four years old. For this innocent child, you would like to have not only one executioner but twelve, who will render her an orphan, and, perhaps, a lost creature, and you pretend to be a Christian."

Involuntarily, the marquis glanced at La Housaye to see what he would say. But this lover was apparently moved at the display of such compassion. As every one maintained a silence, even Pierre de Louarn, Ferréol continued,—

"I do not know of a more dangerous doctrine than pity, whether justified or not. It is the last symptom which precedes the agony of a dying society."

"Suppose we talk of something else," said Montgodfroy. "I have heard nothing since this morning but bombs. After a certain time it irritates the nerves."

"Dear sir," said Thomassin, "the bomb throwers have no other ambition than to shake your nerves. They wish to convince you that there is something to be done."

"Yes, by Jove! there is something to be done, and I have done it. I went to the prefecture of police, and I asked for a private detective. Did you not see him promenading before my door?"

"What, really, you have done that, Honoré?" cried "la belle Martha," with an expanding smile.

"Do you take me for a fool? The fools are those who do not see that I am able to protect myself because I have the wherewithal to pay. Yes, Monsieur Thomassin, the dynamiters will be obliged to go to your house; nothing would stop them there."

A general laugh—even though a little forced—followed this repartee, and there was no further question of bombs that evening.

Ferréol left with Adrien, who wished to speak with him.

"I don't know what may be your opinion of

me," began the young man. "I wish at least to assure you that I am happy, at the bottom of my heart, to have found you again after this long absence. Are we not friends as always?"

They were passing beneath the rays of an electric lamp in Parc Monceau. Ferréol stopped and extended his hand to La Houssaye.

"Look in my eyes," said he. "Do you see aught else than the old friendship?"

"No; but several times during the evening I had a foreboding of reproach. For what do you reproach me?"

"That is a delicate question; nevertheless, because we are always friends, I am going to tell you. I blame you because for a future husband you are too silent. This young girl alarms me with her ideas. They are influencing her mind. Are you not afraid for the future?"

"I am afraid of only one thing,—it is to live without her. When she shall be mine, I will give her so much happiness with the means of giving it to others, that this generous fever which has seized her will abate by itself."

"God help you! I should like another doctor instead of Thomassin to treat this fever. Father Louarn has grown deaf from living so long in the clouds. Once again, you are too silent."

"I have discovered that Mademoiselle de Louarn becomes doubly excited when I discuss with her. At certain moments it seems as though

she wished to try me. As to myself, what matters political ideas, social theories? What is the entire world except her? All the problems of mankind are reduced to one question, Will Antoinette de Louarn love me some day?"

"Probably," said Ferréol; "for you cast at her feet the burnt-offerings that women prefer,—good sense and reason. Allow me to tell you that this dreadful sacrifice shows in a man who offers it more passion than true love."

CHAPTER XIII.

WHILE Adrien was on his way home, Mademoiselle de Louarn was undressing herself in her modest bedchamber. But soon her hands fell motionless by her side,—a thought was agitating her brain. After the events of the evening, she feared that she had hitherto overrated her own nature. For two days she had awaited, with an anxiety not wholly devoid of charm, the moment to meet the marquis again. She dreamed of the torture, the excitement of a struggle with her own heart, the noble anguish of suppressed emotions, a dearly-bought victory,—for she hoped to conquer. She had not forgotten her promise to Adrien of belonging to him some day, if he still aspired to possess the fragments of a lacerated

heart. She had experienced a sort of inward humiliation upon finding that she was quite calm, almost disposed to laugh at herself in the presence of Villegarde. Her hero, stripped of his cap, his hunting-knife and horn, clad in his conventional dress-suit and patent-leather shoes, had become a mere man, even though superior to many others. He always retained the high-bred air and fine carriage of a well-preserved man of fifty, but nevertheless, beneath the bright lights of the salon, age told. Antoinette, instead of completing her toilette for the night, asked herself,—

“What should I do now were I engaged to this grey-moustached gentleman? Would I marry him?”

Involuntarily she turned her eyes towards a glass, and there saw the reflection of her young and triumphant beauty, the faultless lines of her shoulders. As she was contemplating this image, she fancied she perceived scintillate in the background the light of two black eyes, sparkling with passion. For the first time, she felt a thrill—was it of anger?—as she realised what these eyes were saying: “I await my hour.”

The marquis was forgotten, and it was Adrien's hour which filled her thoughts. Would the bell ever ring out for him this time of “forgetfulness and love,” the very words of her audacious lover? Already disgusted with herself, she

understood that sometimes forgetfulness comes very quickly. Was not the conversation in the forester's lodge a mere dream after all? Doubtless the marquis had believed that he was witnessing one of those storms in the feminine breast that a man experienced in life should not have ridiculed. This was why he had shown himself so paternal, so generous. For shame! there had been no storm, but only the momentary enthusiasm of an ill-bred, an ill-educated school-girl, and there remained nothing, nothing but her bitter self-mockery. The tortures, the struggles, the wounded love; what a comedy! She was no longer suffering, her heart was intact. She was infinitely obliged to Villegarde for treating her as he should have done. A sigh escaped her: "*Mon Dieu!* what sort of woman am I, then?"

The mirror replied anew that she was a woman in the splendour of youth and beauty. She saw the rich crimson of her lips, the pure marble of her shoulders, at this moment—she even saw something more. She felt an intense need of some intoxication, in which she might abandon and prostrate herself in order to shake off her too heavy thoughts. Suddenly she fancied she perceived again in the shadow the sparkling light of those same devouring eyes which awaited their hour. Stifling a cry, she extinguished the candles and finished her toilette in darkness.

A few days afterwards, the marquis, out of politeness, called at Pierre de Louarn's. To tell the truth, he did not expect to be admitted, knowing that the "publicist" was rarely at home, and not supposing that his daughter would receive him when she was alone.

But she was not alone, and Ferréol was introduced into a parlour, where he could scarcely see, and was somewhat curtly presented to a little, grey-haired, ill-dressed woman, whose name he did not catch. Indeed, he made no effort to do so, as the stranger seemed second-rate and did not interest him. After a few commonplace phrases, Antoinette suddenly said,—

"I am sure, Monsieur de Villegarde, you could never guess where I was yesterday with madame; so I will tell you. I was at Mornière."

"At Mornière!" exclaimed Ferréol, astonished. "Great heavens! what were you doing there?"

"I was there to distribute bread to those unfortunate beings who have no money to buy it. You know that the quarrymen and stonecutters are on a strike. We visited Souppes, Château-Landon, and some other villages, where we found frightful misery. What an excursion! There was no resemblance to our hunts of last autumn, I assure you."

"You mean," stammered the bewildered

Villegarde, "that you went to encourage the strikers? And—your father approved of it?"

It was the stranger who replied in a metallic voice, worn out rather than broken, which lacked certain musical intonations. The very sound of this voice, which betrayed extreme fatigue and had a rather theatrical accent, wearied and somewhat irritated the listener.

"Pierre de Louarn is seeking to give a God to labourers. Could he blame his daughter if she wishes to give them bread?"

"I presume," coldly articulated Villegarde, "that I have the pleasure of being in the presence of 'Madame Renée,' the journalistic lecturer?"

She replied, chilled by this stiffness, in which she divined little sympathy,—

"When I have recourse to pen or speech, it is always against my will, and with but one object,—to relieve those who suffer."

"To enlighten them sometimes would also be a good work," said Ferréol. "But our age, which places the ideal of happiness in material enjoyment, must consider suffering as the only evil."

"Would you like to have us, then, go back to the asceticism of the Middle Ages, when suffering and death were blessings?"

"No, madame; rest easy. I would not go back to the Middle Ages; but I should prefer

that in the criminal who suffers, the crime should be considered first and his suffering second."

"But the strikers are not criminals."

"You have not only strikers as *protégés*. Speaking only of this strike,—of strikes in general,—the leaders are simply egoists; those who sustain them, poor, credulous fools, indifferent to the hunger which gnaws the stomachs of their little ones."

"There is no war without famine. Did you never want for bread when fighting for France?"

"Oh, yes! but your quarrymen are not fighting for France. Every strike is a victory of an economical order won by our enemies."

"You are a man and an aristocrat," said "Renée," rising. "Never will you be able to come to an understanding with the ideas of the working-class woman which stirs in me."

Antoinette had not said a word, enjoying the pleasure she had managed to give herself in displeasing the marquis. Alone with Mademoiselle de Louarn, Ferréol asked,—

"Are you not afraid that the newspapers will publish your adventure? What a scandal, if they mentioned it."

Antoinette answered,—

"No one knows the name of the person who accompanied 'Renée' save Abbé Esminjeaud, who saw us. But he will be silent. And, besides, what harm did I do? To distribute bread

to the hungry is not a thing forbidden, even to the most strictly brought up girl of the Faubourg."

"No, that is true; but 'Renée,'—I know that she has grey hair and wears her heart upon her sleeve, nevertheless she is compromising."

"That is not my father's opinion."

"Ah, your father. If I knew him better——"

"Well, what would you do?"

"I should tell him, mademoiselle, that his daughter puts the attachment of a friend of mine to a great test. I should then beg him to transmit this observation to a person interested, —I mean yourself."

"Your message shall be delivered," answered Mademoiselle de Louarn, without smiling. "But the trouble is that this person is not interested. She must be taken as she is, will be, and, above all, wishes to be, or else be abandoned to her unhappy destiny. If some day she should become the wife of a rich man, much of her husband's money will pass through the hands of 'Renée,' or be distributed according to her advice."

"'Renée' decidedly rules you. I should have thought that it was more difficult to gain an influence over your father's daughter."

"How have you formed that opinion? You have never tried to gain any influence, and now it is too late. Yes, I admire this courageous woman, whose friend I am in spite of your re-

proach. She has found her ideal,—compassion.”

“When bestowed, whether deserved or not, compassion is an honourable sickness of the soul,—a sort of generous bulimy. As for myself, I should prefer charity, which is a sound and healthy appetite. The dream of your new friend is a kind of ‘Society for the Protection of Animals,’—human animals, I mean, even though they be beasts of prey. You will have some annoyances from your ideal, at least such as you understand it.”

A first annoyance, which was easy to foresee, was an attack on Antoinette. Her incognito of the evening before was not so well preserved as she had thought. A short time after the departure of the marquis, another visitor rang the bell and insisted upon seeing her, even though Mademoiselle de Louarn was alone. Adrien, for it was he, held an evening paper in his hand and seemed greatly excited. Without saying a word, he handed Antoinette the paper with an account of the strike, in nowise enthusiastic. The affair, however, was not taken seriously, considering its small number of adherents and the local character of the industry. And for this very reason the rôle of “Renée” on the occasion came near being ridiculed. It derided her open subscription and her appearance among the strikers. But a more serious thing, the paper mentioned her

mysterious companion, "the daughter of a man well known for his work in the labour question." The too-gallant journal added, "This young citizen, who possesses rare beauty, had no fear of herself nursing the wounds of Barillot, slightly scratched in a brawl. Did we give the portrait of the voluntary nurse, there would be a general scuffle in the hope of securing her services."

"Is it credible," said La Houssaye, "you went among these men quite alone with 'Renée'?"

He seemed to have difficulty to restrain his anger, which immediately caused feelings of revolt in Mademoiselle de Louarn. However, she answered, without raising her voice,—

"In no salon have your equals ever treated me with more respect. I was there to do good to the labourers. They were suffering so much."

"And this miserable fellow who wrote these lines, he respects you, also, does he not? Oh! to see you blamed, criticised, judged like an ordinary woman, you! To read these jokes which debase you to the common level! To think that Antoinette de Louarn, the queen, *my* queen, to whom I ought to speak only on my knees, to think that she is the subject of a reporter's article for which he has been paid twenty-five francs. But what are your father and brother about? Ah! if I could——"

“If you could what?” said Antoinette. “Pierce the body of the man who has in your eyes uncrowned me?”

“In order that you might nurse him, too? No; what would be best for my happiness would be to love you no longer. For you ridicule me; you defy me. I see it well. Great Heavens! what is in store for me—later? To what extent will you push your defiance and my humiliation? Antoinette, promise me to have pity and not commit such follies again. I love you so much, and I am so weak in your presence! Put an end to this nightmare, to this trial which is killing me. Be mine to-morrow, and live the life that such a woman as you should live.”

He was feeling too much moved himself to notice the tumultuous agitation which was causing Antoinette’s bosom to heave. Had he at this moment seized her in his arms, the trial, perhaps, would have ended. But already she had had time to picture in her imagination his smile when the marquis would hear the news of the marriage. She fancied she heard him sneer, and with a shrug of the shoulders say,—

“Six months! She only needed six months to be cured of her great love for me!”

At the same time Adrien’s eyes caused her to feel the same thrill she had experienced last night. . . . She answered, endeavouring to make her voice heard,—

"You forget our compact. Until November, I am my own mistress. My father alone has the right to take me to task. Let your conscience judge me. You are free to condemn me, free to love another, and that would be best; we do not understand life in the same way."

"What harm these people have done to you," exclaimed the young man, clasping his hands. "Thomassin, Madame Montgodfroy, and this crazy woman who drags you with her to riots. I shall say to your father——"

Antoinette stopped Arien; placing a finger on his shoulder, and contracting her eyebrows, she said,—

"You will say nothing to my father, my brother, nor to any one else, or you will lose me forever. If I disgust you, go away and never return."

They parted after these words, which, as a rule, bring back a lover vanquished and docile, —a fact all women know well.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE next morning, at an early hour, Villegarde rang at La Houssaye's lodgings, who, not being disposed to ride, had just sent his horse away.

"I counted upon writing you a few lines," said

Ferréol. "I did not think you would avoid the Bois in such admirable weather."

"But you, too, are evidently avoiding it," answered the young man.

"Because I am about to leave for my estate. I have no quarrymen, thank God, but I have forests. Now, strikes lead to poaching. My head gamekeeper writes me that official charges are accumulating, which naturally increases the agitation among my starving neighbours. I am going to take a look round, and came to tell you. But, by the way, what do you say of a raid of two or three days beneath the new-born foliage?"

"A capital idea!" said Adrien; "and, if it is necessary to fight it out, count on my assistance. That would settle my nerves."

At the same time he looked significantly at his panoply. Ferréol replied, seriously,—

"That is just it; we must not fight it out. You are very ferocious, to-day!"

"Grant that I am ferocious. By Jove! the strikers have only to come in my way, if they want to give employment to nurses!"

"Oh! I see you have read that paper. Do not attach too much importance to a pretty woman's caprice. It is a privilege which you must allow the sex."

"You mean that I shall see something more? Possibly! In the meanwhile, I will go away

with you, so much the more readily that Abbé Esminjeaud will do me good."

"So be it," concluded Ferréol. "We will have him to dinner to-morrow evening."

Adrien himself carried the invitation to the curé of Mornière. He followed the road on foot, wishing to return with the holy priest, who never voluntarily entered a carriage.

Adrien no longer recognised the village, where ordinarily were to be seen only women, the masculine portion being at the quarries. To-day, the men in their blouses, covered with mud and white dust, had formed into groups, in which the silence of a dull disquietude had already begun to reign. At the sight of a monsieur, an unknown type in this isolated corner, their eyes grew animated. Perhaps he was a Parisian journalist, or even, who knows? some one from the Chamber. The strike, raised by local leaders up to now, had not attracted attention, in spite of the promises of the organisers. No doubt there would be a meeting. "Meeting!" A word big with hope for the labourers, always deceived, always discontented with their lot. But a fellow who knew Adrien said quite aloud,—

"Depend upon it! he is Ferréol's and the priest's friend."

In the twinkling of an eye their physiognomies grew surly. So much grumbling was heard, that Adrien could fancy himself back in his factory

at Couëron during one of the riots. But that which he saw to-day was merely a shower compared to the storms of yore. The idea that Mademoiselle de Louarn had spoken to these men, that at least she had accompanied the one who did speak, was for him an insupportable bitterness. And this name of "voluntary nurse" of the strike given to her by a newspaper. At this hour Antoinette was not present to defend herself with the irresistible argument of her beauty.

In the little church, already quite dark, Abbé Esminjeaud was performing the duty of sacristan out of economy, the salary of the vacant office being given to the poor. He had just filled the "vielleuse" of the sanctuary and lighted the lamp which every night burned at the foot of the Virgin, the cost defrayed by Louise. Suddenly a masculine form emerged from the penumbra. It was Adrien.

"What a surprise," said the curé; "I hope there is nothing amiss at Villegarde."

"No; but it is safer to be on hand. I have come to tell you that your plate is laid at the château. Let us go."

"Certainly; only let me ring the 'Angelus,' and I will accompany you."

They gained the porch, where, through an opening in the ceiling, was suspended a rope, polished by handling.

The abbé rang three times, then recited aloud

the *Madrigale Angélique*, by which one woman only, since the beginning of the world, has been saluted. In the middle he stopped, by habit, and Le Houssaye responded, as he had done many years before at his mother's knee. Three times the bell sounded, and the prayer of a saint, mingled with that of an unhappy heart, awakened the echoes rarely disturbed in this little church.

"I have not lost my day," said the priest. "I have caused your lips to utter a name which always brings happiness. Tell me, is it not good to pray?" He seemed moved with joy, as if in truth he had accomplished an important work. Adrien replied,—

"I feel younger and very calm, and I long to say, as I did twenty-five years ago after my prayer, 'Bon soir, mamma.' *Dieu*, if I could only return to that period of my life when some one loved me."

He sighed aloud, and it was easy to be seen that his heart was oppressed with a heavy load. Suddenly, with a gesture which betokened that he wished to get rid of certain thoughts, he said,—

"Come quickly; it is late."

Abbé Esminjeaud watched him with close attention, curious to see what unknown sentiment was working in his soul. He was so much absorbed that he did not reply to La Houssaye, and the two started, passing several groups of

men, who sent after them some not very courteous exclamations. After a few moments they entered the forest; the great oaks were still dark, scarcely showing their buds; but away in the horizon, through the glades, could be seen fields of golden buttercups heightened by the glare of the setting sun.

From the boundaries of this kingdom of silence and repose one felt an atmosphere so new, impressions so different, that one would not have been surprised to have heard the passers-by speak in an unknown tongue. But there were no passers-by. The only voice that broke this solitude was the wail of the cuckoo, sending back to each other their never-changing minor thirds, so wonderfully appropriate to this hour and place.

As they reached the first turning of the road, the abbé questioned his companion,—

“You are not taking the path? It is shorter.”

“Yes; but it is impossible to walk for two steps abreast, and I have something that I want to say to you.”

The young man was apparently studying his phrase, then he posed this question,—

“You saw Mademoiselle de Louarn? What a risky adventure, and in what society! What did she do and what did she say? What do you think of her?”

“Oh!” said the priest, “I am a bad judge in

such a case. The 'risky adventure,' as you call it, might shock a man of the world. To the eyes of a disciple of Jesus, who ought to have before all wisdom 'the madness of the cross,' this charitable zeal, even though unreasonable, is not a crime without remission. So far as I know, Mademoiselle de Louarn said nothing, but looked at things a great deal. On the contrary, her companion uttered too many phrases which were not understood. But the labourers are only grown-up children, who like to be cared for and pitied, and to have their burning foreheads cooled; to be told 'the evil will be cured.' Women are marvellously constituted for this *rôle*, and Thomassin is almost a great man to have understood this."

"But this wounded man, this striker, whom she nursed? There she is now exposed to criticisms in the newspapers. Some applaud, while others ridicule her. Fortunately, her name has not been printed."

"And if it were?" said the abbé, looking at his interlocutor; "how conventionality weighs in human judgment! Moreover, the episode has been transformed, which renders it still better for the heroine whose *rôle* was a little *naïf*. Her wounded man is no more a striker than you or I, for the reason that he has never held a tool in his hand. The gamekeepers have known this Barillot for a long time as the worst of my

parishioners, a prison-bird, a marauder, poacher, and capable of many things. The most amusing part is that he was wounded by the wife of one of the strikers for having stolen her poultry, thinking that everyone had gone to the meeting. By chance I happened to witness the scene. The shrew's hand was so heavy and her cudgel so hard that Barillot trotted home with a bleeding forehead, when he encountered 'Renée' and—you know whom. Women are often deceived when they listen to the promptings of their good hearts."

"You did not undeceive Mademoiselle de Louarn?"

"To what purpose? She was happy to adorn this lover of chickens with a *bandeau*, which, moreover, he has preserved as a mark of bravery. I saw it a moment ago. The *rôle* of Barillot has been cut out; 'he is the wounded man of the strike,' and he was indispensable since the newspapers have crowned him with this title. In short, everybody is happy. A charitable woman has made use of her linen and lint. Need you repudiate it as a crime? She said nothing, and limited herself to giving a piece of forty sous, whilst 'Renée' addressed the crowd. I would not swear that the money as well as the bandage have been bestowed suitably. But God only asks for good-will."

La Houssaye did not reply. In his apostolic

simplicity, Abbé Esminjeaud defended Antoinette as certain inexperienced lawyers defend their clients, in a way to irritate the nerves of the judge. A passionate lover suffers less, perhaps, if he sees his idol skirt a crime than if he sees her touched by ridicule. Oh! how little did this sainted curé know the human heart! Unless—but how believe that he was voluntarily *maladroit*—he knew more of another love than the love of hearts?

After a silence, Adrien asked, as though he had been touched by a shadow of a doubt,—

“You are my friend?”

“You are one of the three people whom I love best in the world,” replied the abbé.

And, pointing to the roof of Villegarde, which could be seen in the distance, he added,—

“This is the habitation of the dearest of my three friends. Is he not yours, also?”

“Most certainly. But who holds the second place in your friendship?”

“Mademoiselle Montgodfroy.”

“Pooh! She is a child.”

“Would to heaven there were many such children. No one knows the good she does, which she gives me the means to do. You have never asked the reason why she dresses like a maid, as her father says. Without her, without her uncle, and without you, my third friend, the poor parishioners of Mornière would have been minus

a curé a long time ago. He would have died of starvation. So, how hard do I pray that you may all three be happy."

"Two of your prayers out of the three have been heard, so you must not complain," said La Houssaye.

"I should not complain were such the case, but everything tends to show that the proportion is not so great."

The two companions walked a hundred paces in silence, and then Adrien put a question which was not new on his lips,—

"What do you think of Mademoiselle de Louarn?"

"Allow me to turn my tongue seven times," replied the abbé, smiling, "for this is what you desire to know. Is this young girl good, serious, faithful, devoted? Does she possess a warm heart as well as an infallible judgment? Does she combine a poet's imagination with the cold maturity of a philosopher? In a word, is she worthy not only of seeing God one day, but, still more, to be the wife of Adrien La Houssaye, a terrestrial crown more difficult to merit than the celestial one? And if I should tell you, conceited man, like all men, that this creature is perfection, and that, therefore, you are not worthy of her, what would you say?"

"Such as she is, I do not believe myself to be worthy of her," said Adrien, who in truth had

not the defect of conceit. "But do you think she will lead me, an untamed chimera, towards the abyss where death is found?"

"The unction of the priesthood does not confer the gift of prophecy. Mademoiselle de Louarn may have deceived herself; she may do so again. Let us not condemn her too quickly. She has no mother. And, unfortunately, Pierre de Louarn is a dangerous sort of star-gazer. I don't mean that he will fall into the well, but he forgets too easily that he has a daughter who also is seeking her star. But beware of those telescopes which impede the sight! The eyes of Faith, my friend; that is what can guide better than all instruments and keep individuals and nations from the abyss."

Ferréol de Villegarde came to greet his guests. It was necessary to change the conversation. At dinner, the morning papers were received, which contained a piece of news. During the night, the Anarchist who had thrown one of the last bombs had been condemned to death. As Adrien manifested an almost savage joy, the abbé said,—

"If you love the sight of blood, you, a wise man and happy in your life, what can be expected from the others?"

Adrien shrugged his shoulders, which meant a good deal respecting his happiness, perhaps even his wisdom. He replied,—

"Can one expect anything from anybody or anything in this world?"

"*Cœpit contristari!*" sighed Abbé Esminjeaud. "The Mount of Olives is a pilgrimage that we all make when our time comes. May you re-awaken to joy."

"If the strike continues," said Ferréol, "we will see some riots between the villagers and my men. Some hundreds of starving fellows, or simply those unwilling to work, are scarcely desirable neighbours. I, too, feel discouraged. Were it not a question of an estate which bears my name, I would do as you have done, Adrien,—I should go away."

In the state of mind of the three friends, the dinner and the moments which followed naturally partook of a dark and melancholy tone. After an evening shorter than usual, the curé rose and took leave. As he put his hand in his pocket, he suddenly paled and cried out,—

"*Mon Dieu!* I have forgotten to lock up the church. And all these men who encumber the place!"

"Well, one would say that you had the treasure of Notre Dame," said the marquis, laughing. "What in the devil could one take in your cathedral? A ciborium of two louis?"

"You forget what this ciborium contains," groaned the poor abbé, who trembled in every

limb. "Adieu! I shall run there. God grant that no one has discovered my carelessness!"

"I will accompany you," said Adrien, "for I was the cause of your distraction. It shall never be said that I abandoned you in your anxiety."

Five minutes later the two were running rather than walking in the direction of Mornière. As they neared the exit of the woods, two gamekeepers, attracted by this hurried gait, sprang from an ambuscade and barred the way.

"These fellows are in a devilish hurry," said one of the men.

The other nudged his comrade as he uncovered his head.

"Monsieur le Curé and Monsieur La Housse, is there something wrong at Mornière?"

"It is to be hoped not," replied Adrien. "The church was left open by mistake, and Monsieur le Curé is very anxious."

"Oh, there is no danger," said the gamekeepers, for whom the subject lost all interest since it was not a question of poaching.

Half after ten had just sounded when the abbé and his companion arrived at the church, which stood at the extremity of the village, nearest to the woods. Skirting the building, dimly lighted, they reached the porch, just beyond a spot deserted at this hour. In this calm and very dark night a favourite song of the

stone-cutters reached them, shouted by a crowd, compelled, no doubt, to howl outside for the lack of credit at the public house,—

“ En entrant dans Lyon,
J’ admire ces beaux ponts
Faits par nos compagnons ! ”

The minor melody, evidently old, had, thanks to the distance, a strange sweetness. Adrien La Houssaye sometimes hums it yet, so much are certain details imprinted on the memory at unforgotten hours of our lives. In the meanwhile, Abbé Esminjeaud silently turned the handle of the door, and, in quite a low voice, he said,—

“ God be praised. Some one has locked the door and taken the keys ; but where are they ? ”

Adrien drew near and tried to peep through the key-hole. He uttered a muffled exclamation, and pulling out his knife he tried vainly to introduce a blade. He attempted to peep through again, then, suddenly putting his lips to the curé’s ear, he whispered,—

“ The door is locked on the inside ; the key is on the interior.”

“ *Grand Dieu !* Some one, then, is in the church.”

“ Keep silent, and come with me.”

In two minutes, using the shoulders of the curé as a ladder, Adrien clung to the bars of

one of the windows, and let himself drop with the agility of a cat.

“Control yourself; there is a man in the choir; a man alone, if I am not mistaken.”

“We must call for help.”

“Call whom—the strikers? I would not give a straw for them. Do not let us lose our heads, but take counsel.”

“Take counsel while a dreadful sacrilege is being committed not two steps from us!”

Pulling out his handkerchief, the poor abbé mopped the drops of cold perspiration from his brow. La Houssaye asked,—

“Has the church a second entrance?”

“Yes, at the apsis. But the door is closed by a bolt.”

“Well, then, here is what you must do. Reach this door and bang with your fists. The man will be frightened, and will save himself by the principal entrance, where I will await him.”

“And if he kills you?”

“Oh, I am not so easy to kill. Run quickly; look out for your Hosts.”

The ecclesiastic had regained an appearance of calm. Raising his hand, he made the sign of the cross on Adrien’s forehead.

“May Jesus Christ absolve you! Should you die, it will be as a martyr. But, in God’s name, don’t kill.”

The curé went round to the other door while

his companion lay in waiting under the porch. The young man did not wait long. Some vigorous blows awoke the echoes inside. Almost immediately the latch was turned,—a feeble light showed the malefactor armed with a pistol.

Abbé Esminjeaud kept on striking hard the oak doors. Suddenly the report of a fire-arm reached his ears. The stone-cutters' song suddenly ceased.

"He is dead! And through my fault," cried the priest, springing towards the open door.

CHAPTER XV.

ADRIEN was neither dead nor wounded. He had seen the barrel of a pistol shining, and had sprung just in time at the hand of the thief, who, moreover, was only provided with an old horse-pistol. In trying to secure him he grasped at his waistcoat, which, unluckily, was in tatters, and came away in the hand of La Houssaye. For a few moments the man believed that he was saved.

He scampered away to the plain like a race-horse, not daring to leave the road, easy to distinguish in the darkness. Some one was on his pursuit, and he had to gain the woods. At first he took the lead, but he had more speed than

endurance. The footsteps of the unknown pursuer grew nearer. Already, in the obscurity, he saw at a very short distance a huge dark wall,—the forest and salvation.

Suddenly a sonorous voice, accustomed to far-away calls, broke the stillness of the night,—

“*Écoute, écoute tayaut !*”

And each minute Adrien repeated, as though he was encouraging the hounds separated from the pack,—

“*Écoute, écoute !*”

He succeeded so well, that at the moment when the thief thought to find in the darkness a path through the copse, two gamekeepers sprang from a fence and grabbed him like an exhausted hare. Blowing hard, the man tried to say,—

“What do you want with me? I am doing no harm. I have no gun.”

At the same instant La Houssaye appeared, continuing his cries.

“Monsieur,” said one of the gamekeepers, “the beast is captured,—fox or wolf? I don’t know. The relay was at hand.”

“Let us see the beast, first,” said Adrien, taking breath. “Can you give us a light, Bertrand? Do not be afraid. I am holding the tramp. He will not get away again. I have surprised him robbing the tabernacle of the church.”

"You are breaking my wrist," whined the fellow.

"Shut up, you dog! You wished to break more than my wrist a moment ago with your pistol."

"That is what we heard, then," said Bertrand. "We were watching for your return, when the report startled us, even before we recognised your voice. What! it is Barillot!"

The light of a pocket lantern showed a very young man, a regular tramp in appearance. He wore around his forehead a bandage almost as dirty as the rest of his attire. Adrien knitted his eyebrows, and asked,—

"Who put this bandage on you?"

"A pretty girl, mister. If many such would fall from the skies, I should leave my window open at night. Oh, me! my wrist!"

It was not the wrist, but the throat of Barillot that Adrien longed to grasp in his powerful grip as he said to himself,—

"To know that she is desecrated by the jokes of these brutes! She, whom I have called my queen. And this is the man who has been touched by the hands of Antoinette,—those hands which merely to kiss thrills me."

In the meanwhile the gamekeepers were searching the captive, who endured the trial as a man to whom the operation was not new. At first, nothing suspicious was found on him. Ba-

rillot had evidently been interrupted before he could touch the sacred vessel. A more careful examination brought to light a gold medallion in the shape of a heart, which gave cause for legitimate suspicion. It was undoubtedly new, as well as the ribbon to which it was attached.

“In what shop did you steal this?” said Adrien, turning the object round in his fingers.

With the ignoble accent of a ruffian, the man replied,—

“Stolen? Why should I have stolen it, then? Didn’t your best girl never make you a present?”

“Let us leave some work for the judge,” said Adrien, putting the medallion in his pocket. “It is a question, now, of lodging this fine specimen in a place of safety.”

“At the *Mairie*?” said Bertrand.

“No, my friend, at your lodge. I would not trust the strikers. Let us start; when we have this rascal under lock and key, we will send for the gendarmes.”

“Death to the ‘Cognards,’ *Vive l’anarchie*,” howled Barillot, who had been well trained.

“You sing a little too loudly,” said Adrien, drawing his handkerchief from his pocket.

He gagged this fanatic, whose cries might attract a greater crowd of curious people than there was any necessity for. This precaution taken, they started. Each of the marquis’s men held Barillot by an arm. Adrien followed, ab-

sorbed in his reflections. For the sake of prudence, they had extinguished the lantern. At the end of half an hour they reached the lodge. There they shoved the thief into a low room, where each movement of his could be watched, while one of the men galloped to the police station. It was wise to profit by the night in order to transfer a prisoner of this class across an over-excited country. Adrien could not regain the château without giving his evidence, which would establish the *flagrante delicto*. Alone in the adjoining room, he waited, revolving in his mind certain depressing reflections. In order to divert his thoughts, he examined the medallion found on Barillot.

A stolen object, without doubt; but where from? Mechanically he began fingering the hinge, a bit of writing fell out. Greatly puzzled, La Houssaye unfolded the scrap of paper, and distinguished some lines of microscopical writing, easy to read, however, by the light of a single candle. This note, which he did not understand, was couched in the following terms:

“L. M. makes a vow to go
to Lourdes with her husband,
if this husband be A. H.”

At least, one thing was easy to understand; he had between his fingers a votive offering, which, no doubt, had been placed around the neck of

the Madonna. But it was not probable that a young girl of Mornière could make a gold offering of several louis, still less that she could have an idea of such a wedding journey. Barillot had then entered some other chapel.

Adrien thought to himself, not without smiling a little,—

“How funny! Here am I, in spite of myself, the depositary of a love secret. Poor girl, whoever you are, your story shall not be mixed up with Barillot’s affairs.”

He shut up the medallion, keeping the written lines to avoid the idle gossip of the court. Whilst he was defrauding the magistrate, a light knock was heard at the door. It was the head gamekeeper’s daughter, who brought her master’s friend a plate of hot soup. It was one o’clock in the morning; who could tell at what hour Adrien would be able to go to bed? Awakened by her father, the pretty brunette had set quickly to work, and in a few minutes had prepared one of those comforting broths of which the foresters have the secret. “Monsieur Adrien must be famishing; he had run so much, to say nothing of his having seen death so near!”

“I have scarcely seen it, Fanchette. But it seems it would have been a martyr’s; Monsieur le Curé said so. Is it not a shame that Barillot has missed me? You would have had my statue in your church, with a golden circle around my

head and a horse-pistol in my hand. If I am not mistaken, the martyrs are always represented to the veneration of the faithful bearing their instruments of torture."

"Do not joke, monsieur," replied Fanchette, who was very pious. "What terrible profanation! I hope that the tabernacle has not been touched! Such a sacrilege. Our sainted curé would die of grief."

"I think that the tabernacle is safe. At least, no sacred vessel was found on the man,—only this golden medallion."

"Oh, monsieur," cried the young girl, at the sight of the stolen object, "one would say it is a votive offering to our Lady."

"Do you think so?" asked Adrien, shaking his head. "It is of gold. Look; here is the mark. Do you think that there are devotees in this village sufficiently rich to make an offering of several louis to the church?"

"No, monsieur; but report says that it is Mademoiselle Montgodfroy who gave it. No doubt our curé would be able to tell you more about it. But I think that he will refuse to say anything. These things ought to be kept secret. If you make a vow to the Virgin, she alone ought to know it; otherwise, you will not get what you want."

Adrien was no longer eating. He repeated, in a distrait voice,—

“Ah! indeed. It is Mademoiselle Montgodfroy!”

Then, after a silence,—

“Fanchette, your soup is delicious; but I am no longer hungry. Leave me now. I hope that the gendarmes will arrive soon.”

When alone, he once more unfolded the paper with an unsteady hand. He might have been heard to murmur,—

“L. M.: Louise Montgodfroy—to A. H.: Adrien La Houssaye. My heavens! is it possible? Oh! the poor child!”

He could not have told how long a time elapsed before the entrance on the scene of the public police, and, even during the august cross-examination of the gendarmes, he seemed to be thinking of something else. Finally, he signed the official report, which stated, in a droll and bombastic style, the delivery of the articles of conviction; a pistol “of a form antique and superannuated, but still efficacious;” also, “an article provisionally in gold, use unknown, of the size and form approximating a rabbit’s heart.” Of course, it can be imagined that the mysterious lines were not mentioned in the inventory. They remained “provisionally” in the pocket-book of A. H.

As Barillot was marched off handcuffed, he said, with an insolent air, to the author of his arrest,—

“Well, are you satisfied?”

“Yes, by Jove! quite satisfied,” replied La Houssaye.

He himself left the lodge, refusing the escort of the gamekeepers. He started in the direction of the château, then suddenly wheeled around and, for the third time that day, took the road to Mornière. The church door stood open, and by the dim light of the lamp he could perceive the form of the abbé lying prostrate on the stones. On the altar the door of the tabernacle was torn from its hinges.

Adrien placed his hand on his friend's shoulder, who displayed a face bathed in tears.

“Look!” said the priest, “the Holy of Holies has not terrified this miserable sinner. I have nearly fainted from grief, and had we arrived two minutes later, what profanation he would have committed! But you, my friend, I believed that you were dead. Thank God! my anguish did not last long. I saw you disappear in pursuit of the man.”

“He is captured: I came to tell you. It was Barillot, the *protégé* of Mademoiselle de Louarn. Will she come to console him in prison? But there is something else. Is there not missing from one of your chapels a medallion given by Mademoiselle Montgodfroy?”

The curé ran to his Madonna.

“It is stolen——”

“Reassure yourself; it is in a safe place, like the thief; and now I will leave you. I am sleepy. We will meet soon probably before the magistrate.”

What Adrien desired was rather solitude than sleep after so many events. He was one of those natures who only recover their balance by communing with themselves. Astonishing thing! instead of fatigue, he felt a still indefinable satisfaction which rendered his body as well as his mind quite alert. No doubt the joy by which all beings are animated who have escaped a deadly danger played a great part in this enjoyment of life. He could still hear the ball whizzing by his ear. He thought what would have happened, had he not had such strength, such calmness, and, above all, such good luck. He felt a slight, cold shiver, not totally disagreeable, as he muttered to himself, “I should have been nearly, if not quite, cold by this time.”

Then another thought came to him,—

“Finally, I should have been wept for by this little Louise;” and probably this idea was the cause of the smile which played on his face. Some hours before, speaking of Mademoiselle Montgodfroy, he had said, “She is but a child.” How could one be so mistaken, and help seeing that in her breast there beat a woman’s heart, with its hopes, its griefs, and its tenderness, all which she concealed from every eye! What courage! What purity! What naïve faith!

Another would have resorted to coquetry, or would have betrayed her jealousy. Another would have sulked, wept, detested her rival; but this angel of sweetness wore always the same smile, only a little sad. Oh! how sad at certain moments. And in order to obtain the grace which she desired above all, (poor mistaken child,) she had recourse to celestial influence. She had made a vow; this supreme means for souls who believe, in a desperate case. Yes, alas! Louise's case was desperate.

“And I,” said the young man, “what will be my future?”

Then came to him, like a fresh puff of air, a sort of selfish consolation,—at least someone loved him. Alas, it was not at this door that his hungry heart humbly begged. And yet he experienced a strange sweetness in knowing that beyond a threshold, discreetly closed, a generous love awaited him, with extended hands longing for devotion. There he need fear no deception, no struggle, no revolt. He cut short his reflections, and said to himself: “What difference does it make now? Fate has decreed that what I suffer on account of another, this charming creature must suffer through me. How badly is life arranged.”

It is curious to see how readily we leave to women the *rôle* of martyrs in the romances which our imagination sketches, or which exist in

reality. This was just what Adrien was doing; "but," he added, with the conviction of a pure conscience, "it is by no fault of mine."

Men are seldom able to apply justly this remark to themselves. The cogitator had halted on a little bridge still far from Villegarde. Leaning his elbows on the parapet, he watched the pale scintillations of the stars reflected in the pure crystal water, which reminded him of the eyes of this charming girl, whose love was his, even though "it was no fault of his." Suddenly one of those annoying voices which sometimes spoil the inward satisfaction of the Pharisee sounded in his ears, and the little ripples of the babbling brook seemed to repeat the words,—

"Let us suppose, oh, irreproachable man, that it is within your power to make Louise forget you, by giving to us the lines that you have in your pocket, and which do not belong to you, would you do it?"

Adrien did not possess one of those cunning minds which always have an argument at hand to get out of a difficulty. But he made to the ripples this subtle reply,—

"Since the lines of Louise do not belong to me, I have not the right to give them to you. Leave my conscience alone, then."

He even had the cynicism of confessing to himself that he was curious to see this young girl again. And smiling at the idea of this

meeting, which he promised himself should not be delayed, La Houssaye resumed his walk, without remarking that he had thought for several minutes of a woman who was not Antoinette.

When he wished to turn his thoughts once more to "his queen," a strange alteration had taken place. Adrien loved still the same woman, but she no longer seemed to him the only woman in the universe. There stood beside her another equally difficult to forget. What man can forget the first woman who has trusted him with the "to be or not to be" of her happiness without a word or a sign? And which memory is the surest of accompanying us to the tomb,—that of the cold statue, blindly worshipped, or that of the tender creature who loves in silence?

"N'ayant rien demandé, et n'ayant rien reçu."

Adrien now understood that Louise was disparaging Antoinette in his eyes, and this revelation was rather a shock to him. The poor innocent girl only gained by it to be momentarily consigned to the pillory. One would have said she had just stolen some of the pearls from the coronet of "Her Majesty." But what could be done, for this crime was not amenable to the law? To be quite just, moreover, the queen was careless in guarding her treasure.

The nocturnal wanderer was at this point in his reflections, when the watchman who every

night stood guard beneath the windows of the château cried out "*Qui vive?*" Recognising the pedestrian, he informed him that Ferréol, after waiting a long while, had gone to his room, thinking that his friend had lingered to dream beneath the stars.

The next day La Houssaye repaired to Fontainebleau for the cross-examination, where the sight of Barillot revived his resentment against Antoinette. From Fontainebleau he reached Paris, without returning to Villegarde.

CHAPTER XVI.

His first visit was to the Montgodfroys, which may make sceptics smile. Should some of these sceptics wonder why he was not going at once to the Louarns, his answer was at hand, or rather he had twenty good reasons, of which the following are some. In the first place, on their meeting, he was afraid of letting Antoinette see some things not quite agreeable and which weighed on his mind. In the second place, he disliked the idea of perhaps finding her with "*Renée.*" Among the other reasons, the Louarns lived a long way off, the Montgodfroys were close at hand. He wished to know the opinion of an unprejudiced man, such as the banker, on

his adventure which the newspapers had mentioned. The marquis had entrusted him to carry the news to his niece; finally, Abbé Esminjeaud had said that Mademoiselle Montgodfroy would be greatly interested in the tragic events of which her dear church at Mornière had been the scene.

Perhaps Adrien would have kept to himself his twenty-first reason,—his curiosity. He resembled a man who, having passed many times before a house completely shut up, learns one fine day that he has fallen heir to it. He does not count upon occupying it; he resides elsewhere, indeed; but he is curious to see what this dwelling is like which might be his, to know its luxury, and draws comparisons—who knows?

Such were Adrien's feelings as he entered the Montgodfroys' house at the close of an afternoon. The hour had not been selected at random.

Honoré was chatting with Louise, which he usually did before dinner. "La belle Martha" was out.

"Ah!" exclaimed the banker. "When one speaks of the devil—— My daughter was just questioning me on your experiences, which are quite Gaborian-like. Is what all the papers report true? You resemble the heroes of the Iliad who fought like lions and ran like deer.

I should have been killed, in all likelihood, but I should never have caught the thief."

Louise was deeply affected, and, finding it difficult to conceal her emotions, deemed an explanation necessary,—

"These stories of burglary always frighten me. It seems as though I were once more seated on my nurse's lap."

"What a child!" sighed Honoré, shrugging his shoulders. Adrien smiled. A child! Ah, these deep eyes, shining with a gentle light, were quite the eyes of a tender, good, devoted woman. It was amusing to see how little her father understood Louise.

"Mademoiselle," said the hero, "forgive me for having indirectly alarmed you, but calm yourself; the robber has killed no one, and has stolen nothing except a small gold medallion which I found in his pocket."

With evident anxiety, the young girl exclaimed,—

"A votive offering which I have seen around the Virgin's neck, and—Abbé Esminjeaud set store by it."

"Well, mademoiselle, our friend will find his votive offering when the judges are through with it."

"Oh, how I hope they will send the man to prison."

"You do not share the opinion of 'Renée'?"

asked La Houssaye, a little sadly. "She believes that there are no criminals only sick people."

Montgodfroy burst out laughing,—

"Oh, my daughter is quite behind the times. She was just saying to me when you entered, 'I do not understand how Mademoiselle de Louarn——'"

"Papa!" exclaimed Louise, and she sprang up as though to close her father's mouth.

"Why, papa! Monsieur La Houssaye sees things in the same light as we do. Your friend is a crank, who is too much neglected by her father; and, by the way, I wish you to go there as little as possible."

Adrien looked at his watch, meditating his escape. He had the courage necessary to defend his heart's choice before all the world, but in the presence of Louise he felt himself a coward. He left rather brusquely, under the pretext that someone was waiting for him.

This disloyal knight was not aware that he was telling the truth; for, in fact, he found Pierre de Louarn awaiting his return. His face evidently betrayed annoyance, for Antoinette's father, on seeing him, exclaimed,—

"Don't be afraid; I have not come to interview you. I suppose you are surfeited with it. But someone urges me to say something about this stone-cutters' strike. You have been able to form some opinion because you saw it."

“I did not see the strike,” answered Adrien, coldly. “I saw a striker or would-be striker who robbed a church; so you guess my opinion, since I had him put in jail.”

Without noticing the irritable tone, the director of the “Amendment” continued,—

“Thanks to you, the rascal will be punished. But this strike is none the less interesting because it is quite local and confined to one branch of trade. No politician has thus far perverted it. These stone-workers nearly all have a wife and children, and demand the living wage, which is one of the claims that I acknowledge. We could speak together better if you will accede to my and my daughter’s wish to come and dine with us. Antoinette is dying to learn some of the circumstantial details. Your place is always reserved for you.”

Adrien could not refuse. Antoinette demanded his presence! The two men left together, one speaking of his next day’s article, the other saying to himself,—

“What matters it to me, all the thieves and strikers in the world? When her beauty shall belong to me, I will shut her up in my heart as behind a wall, or rather I will carry her far away from these people who are leading her astray, far from ‘Renée,’ Thomassin, Martha Montgodfroy, far from her own father, and then——”

What this "then" meant may be guessed by every young and passionate being.

While Adrien was entering the parlour, Pierre de Louarn disappeared for a few moments. His daughter was reading near a lamp, which set off to advantage her beautiful features and the lines of her bust. La Houssaye seemed to drink in the chief charm which emanated from her entire presence, as if seeking a sort of intoxication. While she was looking at him, astonished to see him no longer timid, discerning some change in him, the young man said in a smothered voice,—

"My heavens! how beautiful you are!"

She was silent for a moment; then she answered,—

"You know my opinion of compliments; let us speak of more serious subjects. You have been near dying; what does one feel in face of death?"

"Not much, when one is not loved."

"You see, then, that it is better not to be loved."

"Yes, in the same sense that it is better not to live, according to some people. But I love life."

"Happy man; could you tell me why you love it?"

"Because—well, I should like to die only after having lived for one hour; *lived*,—you understand me?"

Antoinette understood his meaning so well that her lips began to tremble. This burning wind of desire and passion agitated her in spite of herself.

With clenched teeth, Adrien murmured,—

“Oh that mouth!”

She had closed her eyes; feeling that he was about to spring towards her and clasp her in his arms. The door opened: Pierre de Louarn entered. It is not always the months and years of struggle which change our lives. Sometimes it is the advance or delay of a second by the pendulum of destiny.

They sat down at table immediately and the conversation was changed. La Houssaye told his story, even as he had told it to the Montgodfroys, but not with the same result. Perhaps Antoinette was more intrepid than Louise, or maybe she hid her impressions better, for the recital of the short encounter seemed in nowise to terrify her. She only said, by way of conclusion,—

“Any creature, man or beast, at bay has but one object,—to kill.”

Adrien, who considered it less dangerous to speak of stags than of men with this kind of an interlocutrice, answered with a smile,—

“And, nevertheless, you are a fearless huntress.”

“I was,” said Mademoiselle de Louarn, her

eyes growing suddenly hard; she still remembered a certain *hallali* of Ferréol's.

"What do you mean?—that you no longer care for hunting?"

"No; I am through with it. No one will ever see me again follow the hounds or assist at a quarry."

Certain words produce an effect beyond their importance. Whether Mademoiselle de Louarn was fond or was not fond of hunting was a matter of secondary importance to her husband, whoever he might be.

But Adrien, an enthusiastic sportsman, saw another difference between his and Antoinette's tastes. He remembered how happy he had been to lend her his horse. How much trouble lost! His brow reddened with anger, but he contented himself by replying,—

"As you please, mademoiselle. After these words, I will put Elphin up for sale to-morrow."

Louarn, generally very distrait, no doubt had understood a part of the thoughts of his guest, for he said to his daughter with unusual severity,—

"I never knew that you were an ingrate."

She replied,—

"I am not an ingrate, but I assure you that hunting does not agree with me."

"Neither do politics. You will give me the

pleasure of allowing 'Renée' to attend the strikes by herself another time."

"What, father! is it you who speak so?"

A discussion began between the father and daughter. Adrien carefully avoided any interference; but his bad humour was soon changed into consternation. It was evident that the young girl surpassed the doctrines of the "Social Amendment." And, above all, it was quite evident that Pierre de Louarn had lost his authority over his daughter. Thomassin and "Renée" had been there.

In spite of his silence, the physiognomy of the young man was eloquent; it was more than Antoinette could support. She was one of those numerous women whom contradiction, even silent, exasperates. Moreover, she had another reason to be exasperated; that unknown emotion that agitated her in the presence of Adrien.

As if in defiance, she suddenly turned towards him with this unexpected outburst,—

"You are trembling with indignation, are you not? What do you want? I am a woman, and I only see the suffering. You are a man, and only see the fault. Some day, perhaps, we shall be admitted to fill State appointments; but we will never do to serve as judges, and still less as torturers."

"I believe," added Adrien, "indeed, the first of these functions would not suit you. As for

the second, that is another thing. Many women do not scruple to torture. Suffering no longer affects them when it is they who cause it."

"Because for the most part of the time it is your pride that we cause to suffer."

"If you loved some one, would his possessing no pride be a charm for you?"

"Perhaps. In order to know, it would be necessary for me to love some one."

When a woman cries out from the house-tops that she loves no one, one would have the right to ask the cause of her crying so loudly. But Adrien understood better leading the dogs back to the right scent than reading a feminine heart, which, by the way, is an easier task. Pushed to the utmost extremity, which spared neither his heart nor his pride, he answered,—

"We know, mademoiselle, that you reserve your compassion for Barillot. It is a pleasure to see how well placed it is, when one has the honour of being one of your friends."

"Your friendship is somewhat satirical. No matter, I would not exchange my *rôle* of voluntary nurse for that of a detective, which is yours."

"Come, come, be silent," interrupted de Louarn, throwing down his napkin and rising from the table; as he passed into his study to take a cigar, his daughter said to La Houssaye with a menacing gesture,—

"You forget our compact. I have warned

you; if you incite my father against me, expect nothing more."

"Great heavens, what can I expect?" sighed the young man.

Antoinette scarcely opened her mouth the rest of the evening, the commencement of which presaged something else rather than discord.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE marquis only remained a few days at Villegarde. The strikes had now subsided, the men having no longer the money with which to drink; alas! they had often none wherewith to eat. Furthermore, they began to see that their only pay consisted in fine promises. The subscriptions remained open, but produced nothing; the Municipal Council of Paris had voted nothing. The question had not yet been brought before the Chamber of Deputies. For, to tell the truth, the last exploit of Barillot rather threw a damper on everybody.

Having returned to his bachelor quarters in the Avenue Hoche, Ferréol kept noticeably apart, even though the season was at its height. On the contrary, "la belle Martha" plunged deeper than ever into the whirlpool of high life. Did

anybody express astonishment at seeing her without her daughter, she would say,—

“I am gaining a year. The marriage proposals will come in soon enough. Besides, Louise does not like society.”

This was not one of those falsehoods which mothers holding to their youth sometimes allow themselves. Instead of growing worldly with age, Mademoiselle Montgodfroy showed a taste more and more marked for solitude; but since her uncle's return she had been much less alone. Villegarde had taken pity on the gentle creature, so sadly isolated between a father deep in business and a mother so little fitted for maternity. Every day he had some *tête-à-têtes* with his grand-niece, cruel and delicious moments for the young girl, who could then throw off her mask of childhood.

Sometimes she said to her uncle, with a broken-hearted smile in which there was so little youth,—

“You are my father, my mother, my all.”

Alas! Villegarde well knew that he was not all. But for this little widow of eighteen, as she called herself, he had some consolation which might have been inspired by a feminine tenderness. Besides, Louise did not wish to despair yet for certain reasons.

“I love him so much, the other loves him so little,” she said to her uncle. “Then, if a miracle

is needed, why should I not obtain it? Many greater ones have been worked."

One morning, coming to breakfast with the marquis, she arrived first. Villegarde was belated in the Bois. While waiting for him, she glanced over a sporting journal, one of the few that she was permitted to read. One line caught her eye, as if the whole page only comprised these few words,—

"Elphin, owned by Monsieur La Houssaye, is put up for sale at ——."

Villegarde entering at this moment, his grand-niece threw her arms around his neck.

"Well, what is the matter? Your cheeks are burning; you, who ordinarily are like tepid water, are at the boiling point. Where is the fire?"

Without a word, she pointed to the announcement.

"Strange!" said Ferréol. "But what does that prove? I repeat to you my refrain, little one,—no illusions."

"I have no illusions, I assure you. But Elphin suppressed, it seems to me there is one enemy the less. Oh, I hated that one. There are so many others I am obliged to love like myself out of love of God."

"And you succeed?"

"Sometimes, after I have prayed a good deal or have talked with Abbé Esminjeaud. But

now I have only one idea, why did he not wish to keep——”

She stopped herself just in time, the door opened admitting the owner of Elphin. After greeting Mademoiselle Montgodfroy, Adrien said to the marquis,—

“I missed you at ‘Poteaux.’* I wished to speak to you on a little business matter; I will come back, as you are not alone.”

Louise had picked up the journal with a trembling hand, which was increased as she felt she was watched by La Houssaye. Why this embarrassing attention? Heretofore she had never counted for anything in the eyes of this indifferent man, and God knows how much this knowledge had made her suffer. But now it seemed as if he was watching her too much.

One will say that it would have been more generous in Adrien to ignore Louise’s presence as he had previously done, but to do this he would need to be constituted differently from other men, and no one pretends that he was.

Who will deprive himself of inhaling the delicious odour of a flower, for the reason that he has no intention of culling it? Alas! the haughty flower selected by this unhappy man, the invincible Antoinette, thus far had refused him the divine perfume. He made the com-

* The Rotten Row of the Bois de Boulogne.

parison a little bitterly, and resolved at least not to trample upon the tender violet so long unnoticed.

Nothing, moreover, could be more delicious than Louise's shyness. Was he not beginning to ask her questions, to enquire into her tastes and ideas? She replied in the best way, greatly surprised that anyone, he, above all, should be interested in her; happy when she saw that he approved. But Adrien frowned occasionally in a peculiar way, and poor Louise feared that she had answered indiscreetly, little suspecting that, on the contrary, she had answered only too well. Reason, wisdom, and love dictated every word which she spoke. One would have said that she had worked cunningly to show herself off, at the expense of the other, and heaven knows that no creature was less cunning. Adrien reflected,—

“We think the same way on everything. Life with this child would pass like a dream of sweetness, without discussion or struggle.”

He resented the mere idea of a comparison, even in his heart of hearts, as a disloyalty to his beloved. At least, no one could blame him for drifting into a current of friendship for Louise. With a sort of compassion for himself, the cruelty of which he did not see, he said to the young girl,—

“What a pity that we are not thirty years older, we should be such good friends. Your judgment is so good.”

This compliment, which rent her soul, she accepted bravely, but replied,—

“That need not be an objection. I assure you that in certain respects I am quite an old woman.”

“The idea!” said Adrien. “After two or three years you will no more think of me than you do of your first doll. Everything changes in this world; it is the supreme law. Everyone makes his own life and lives for himself.”

He already experienced a strange bitterness at the thought that he would be forgotten by Louise. She would marry another man; perhaps some day she would laugh with her husband, between caresses, at her first passion. She would be the one to forget, he the forgotten. In advance, he experienced a vague displeasure mingled with an unconscious jealousy against the consoler who was sooner or later to come. Ferréol watched him closely, and said in a serious tone,—

“My dear Adrien, Barillot’s pistol-shot has transformed you. You have become as pessimistic as though you were twenty.”

Louise protested.

“Why always abuse the young? Am I pessimistic, then?”

“Oh, mademoiselle, you do not count. You are one of those believers to whom conviction gives hope, which they complete, if necessary, by resignation. Such are our people of Brittany

who start on a pilgrimage to pray for fine weather carrying an umbrella. These in any case do not run the risk of getting wet."

Mademoiselle Montgodfroy, astonished at this rather discourteous reply, said nothing; but the marquis came to her rescue,—

"And you, my friend, do you know what you resemble? Those spoilt children who cry without knowing what they want. What do you require to please you? To throw oneself into the arms of Schopenhauer or in those of religion? There scarcely seems to be a middle course. Heed well, however, that it is not Schopenhauer who has said that 'love is stronger than death,' and neither is it he who has proclaimed the dogma of hope and remembrance beyond the tomb."

La Houssaye was silent; then he got up, forgetting the object of his visit, which was to announce Elphin's disgrace. In vain, Ferréol entreated him to stay to breakfast, in vain did the blue eyes of his niece second the invitation, little suspecting that they were so eloquent. La Houssaye was not to be moved, but on taking leave of Mademoiselle Montgodfroy he kissed her hand for the first time in his life. And while he was thus treating her as a grown-up young lady, he murmured these words, which on this occasion might have more than one meaning, "Pardon!"

When he was in the street, he thought,—

“As things are, the conversation of this young girl is of no service to me. Poor little thing, it is distressing to see her suffer. Alas! does not one always suffer? With Antoinette I might have some cruel hours,—but no matter, provided one day the heavens open.”

Thus faithfully obstinate in his passion, he forced back his thoughts to his heart's chosen one, or, to speak more correctly, to her who had vanquished him. But since he had found a certain prize in a thief's pocket, these mysterious *tête-à-têtes* with his imagination had been disturbed.

Between himself and Mademoiselle de Louarn a third person had just come on the scene, a discreet, silent witness, who caused him a strange uneasiness. He always believed that he felt the deep and pure look of Louise fixed on him, on them both, and, in spite of himself, he drew comparisons in his mind, a dreaded process of analysis. Now, can it not be said that analysis is the exterminating angel to love when it is weak, and often when it is strong?

In nations badly governed one is sure to see spring up at the side of the throne a prince of royal blood whom the malcontents choose as their leader. In the same way all that was suffering in Adrien—his reason, his manly dignity, his tastes and ideas—turned to Louise as

the possible queen in whom opposition was impersonated.

This did not prevent him from returning to see Antoinette, who was with "Renée;" so he did not enter, but left his card with these reproachful words: "I do not wish to spoil a *tête-à-tête*."

In order to console or avenge himself, he took his way to the Montgodfroys' house at the hour when he knew that he should find the father and daughter alone. Once again he came away calmed, carrying with him the remembrance of Louise's smile. The *other* never smiled!

When he next saw Antoinette it was with a regret, for this interview was stormy. It was he who raised the storm, *à propos* of "Renée." With all her Breton obstinacy, Mademoiselle de Louarn defended her friend.

"She is a good woman, whose conduct is irreproachable, and she is clever. My father opens his doors and the columns of his newspaper to her. Those who object to meeting her in our home need not come here."

"But still she does not believe in God."

"Does she hinder you from believing in Him? Have you now become such a religious man?"

"Certain manias are contagious. She is a crank, who loves to see her name in print. Sooner or later there will be some scandal about her and you."

“You will not rescue me from it. Why do you insist on coming here? Look for a wife worthier of you and who——”

She stopped, as though seized by timidity. Adrien, without noticing the hesitation, completed the phrase,—

“And who loves me. It seems impossible to you that one could love me. And should you be told that this incredible thing has happened, how you would shrug your shoulders.”

There was a gleam in Antoinette’s eyes that looked very much like jealousy. She answered,—

“You ought not to believe too easily in love ; you are too rich.”

Adrien continued, almost smiling. He knew perfectly well that Montgodfroy’s only daughter, the heiress of Villegarde, did not love him because of his fortune.

“That is to punish me for having spoken like a coxcomb. It serves me right.”

He changed the subject, making some commonplace remarks and took leave, ashamed for half betraying the secret of another. Strange to say, he did not suffer now as he had done in seeing his love scorned by Antoinette. He knew where to find, if he wished, a greeting less disdainful ; and, certain that a pure spring of tenderness was flowing near him, he better supported the thirst which cruelly exasperated his heart.

When he returned home, he found a stamped document which called him as a witness to the criminal court of Melun for the case of Barillot. The morning papers had announced the trial for the succeeding week. Adrien did not suspect that he was going to be tried even before the prisoner was.

The scene took place on the morrow when he paid a visit to Antoinette. As he was railing against this duty to which he was obliged to submit, Mademoiselle de Louarn said,—

“I understand your repugnance: you will hold in your hands the fate of a poor devil, for, in fact, you are the only witness. It is a frightful responsibility.”

“But, no,” answered La Houssaye; “nothing frightens me less than to have this blackguard condemned who wished to kill me. My greatest objection in the matter is to be disturbed; to go through the tedious length of the sitting, to endure the stuffy atmosphere, the contact—in one word—the criminal formalities.”

“For you all this will be finished in a few hours, but this unfortunate man, how many years will he have to suffer the hardest punishment? Think of this fragment of existence—the best—that will be sliced from his life. Perhaps he will be an old man when he is allowed to commence life anew.”

“If you would like my opinion,” said Adrien,

“this permission will come only too soon. Crimes are punished too leniently.”

“You speak in this way because you are among the impeccables, in other words, among the lucky ones. Hunger deprives a man of free arbitration.”

“I imagine that I am listening to your masters!” exclaimed La Houssaye, carried away by indignation. “You are evidently convinced that one is always happy when one is rich. Must I repeat to you that I envy Barillot? He does not love you, but, more favoured than I, he has your compassion.”

“What has the fellow gained by it except your hatred? I can read in your eyes what your testimony will be. You will use all your arguments in the accusation.”

“What would you like? In order to please you, must I declare that Barillot shot at a target?”

For one instant La Houssaye remained silent. In his mind once more he saw the scene which had betrayed Louise’s secret to him. The flame of anger in his eyes was extinguished at the memory of this sweet creature, and, in a softened voice, he said,—

“You are wrong to believe that I hate this wretched fellow. But I cannot change our fate,—neither his nor mine.”

“I give up all hope of touching you,” Antoinette replied; “you are indomitable.”

"How do you know? What tames men is tenderness. Have I ever heard from your lips one single word for which my heart thirsted?"

So saying, he parted from Antoinette. Had he retraced his steps, he would have found this being whom he had accused of heartlessness bathed in tears.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Two days before his trip to Melun, Adrien joined Ferréol and his grandniece, who were cantering in the *Allées des Poteaux*. Their conversation at once turned on Barillot's case.

"I am sorry to see you mixed up in this trial," said Louise. "Should the man be condemned, it will be because of your testimony. Certainly, one must tell the things as they happened; but, but——"

The poor girl did not know how to get out of it, especially as she saw Adrien frown. He thought to himself—

"Is she also going to ask me to spare this dog?" He exclaimed abruptly,—

"Does Barillot interest you?"

"Oh, no," she said, indignantly. "Only I hear of bombs being thrown in retaliation.

Should this thief have any friends who wish to avenge him, in your place I should take some precautions."

She had blushed brightly on first perceiving Adrien, but had now become quite pale. The young man had lost nothing of this change, and this gentle anxiety for his safety caused him true emotion. For the first time he felt the soothing joy, surpassed perhaps by no other, that of being loved; the invisible caress of tender solicitude. He replied by one single word, looking at Louise as he had never done before,—

"*Merci*, mademoiselle."

It may be noticed that he kept long phrases for the *other*; the last time he parted from Louise it was with a simple "pardon." Yet he admitted to himself that Antoinette's philanthropy was not worth much compared to the words he had just heard stammered.

Barillot was quickly sentenced, and at one sitting; his lawyer deemed it necessary to advertise his client as a political hero. The principal witness so little spared the accused that the sentence *au maximum* was pronounced. The same evening Adrien slept in Paris.

As the season was drawing to a close, every one was about leaving the city. The Montgodfroys were returning to Saint Urbain; Villegarde to his woods. As to Pierre de Louarn, he was detained by his occupations, or rather his

preoccupations; the "Social Amendment" was on its last legs.

To tell the truth, his management had killed it. This dreamer, whose judgment was questionable, was incapable of drawing a line in his ideas or in men. He could draw a crowd for an hour, but he could not hold it. Whereas, for a journalist to succeed in France, it is necessary to dissimulate a lack of principle beneath the false appearance of conviction. Pierre de Louarn was a soul of bronze mounted on a pivot. Moreover, Christian Socialism was going out of fashion, precisely because its most powerful patron, the Pope, was making a kind of religious dogma of it. For a time the edulcorated juice of its doctrines had allured the drones in a common buzz with the bees; but the two swarms, each discontented with what could satisfy the other, had retreated, one to the hive of faith, the other to the rotten trunk of the tree of Atheism. The very voice of the chief who was recommending the union of Catholic Conservatives and the Catholic Socialists suggested battles too formidable for our indifference of to-day; instinctively, each party fell back to its respective rank in the light skirmish of every-day discussion.

The dispersion of the individual characters already known to the reader had taken place. Montgodfroy was gently cutting off his daughter's intimacy with Antoinette. The marquis had no

occasion to see the Louarns again, and did not seek to make one. Fernand's manœuvres were being performed elsewhere, and each day he awaited the capitulation of the enemy, in other words, that of a very rich notary adorned with a daughter. As for the brilliant Thomassin, the "feminist apostle," he had left the parterre of roses for furrows less flowery, but more serious. He was preparing to present himself for a Social candidateship in the House of Deputies.

He broke off relations with the "Amendment," where it was said one was liable to take cold in the compassionate tears of "Renée." As for "la belle Martha," she had had quite enough of ill-dressed apostles, who, moreover, were too careless of their persons. At this moment she was studying Buddhism under the guidance of an elegant and perfumed amateur Bonze, who instructed the Parisians in his bachelor apartment, delightfully furnished and decorated in the style of a Hindoo temple, on the left bank of the Seine. His turban, his long red silk gown, and his yellow sash, which he wore in *intimité*, gave an extra charm to his theories on the Transmigration of Souls.

Of all these persons, Antoinette was the unhappiest. She had abandoned the snowy heights of indifference and had not been able to attain the sun-warmed valleys of love. She had lost the bright light of Faith without falling into the

dark abyss of Atheism, where her soul could conveniently slumber. While she was seeking to love men for themselves at "Renée's" school, she experienced a heart-sickening disgust caused by a food in which the divine salt was wanting.

La Houssaye, in the meanwhile, was revolving slowly around the spot, like a fatigued oarsman whose boat is surprised between two currents. There were but a few months to elapse before he could claim from Antoinette the fulfillment of her promise. Until then he would not think, struggle, or anticipate. He had become a fatalist,—that which must be will be. Does not time pass away without being hastened by our desires? Sometimes, in spite of everything, the future appeared to him hazardous, but then he thought,—

"Well, I shall not be the only one to suffer. Another will be unhappy,—the pretty believer who will not make a wedding trip to Lourdes with the husband she has asked for in her prayers."

Since the trial at Melun there was a sort of truce existing between Antoinette and himself. No allusion had been made to irritating subjects,—“Renée,” Barillot’s sentence, the execution of the bomb thrower, which was daily expected. Moreover, Pierre de Louarn was much occupied with a project in view, a religious retreat for labourers presided over by Abbé Esmin-

jeaud, which was to be held in a working-man's hall. It commenced the afternoon before Adrien's return to Mûrier. While it was opening, the young man called to take leave of the Montgodfroys, themselves also on the point of departing. Louise was not in the salon, but he met her in the hall as he was going.

"You have come to bid us adieu?" she asked.

"Adieu! Oh, no; only *au revoir*. We shall see each other in a few days at Brie. I shall return to Mûrier to-morrow."

She restrained with difficulty an exclamation of joy.

"What! you are leaving Paris?"

As she remarked the same scrutinising look in Adrien's eyes she had noticed before, she added, quickly,—

"I meant—I mean to say that I thought that Abbé Esminjeaud's sermons would attract you here; you admire his eloquence so much."

"In his village church, yes. But this meeting, no matter how religious it may be, causes me to fear a little for him. I have just seen him, and made my apologies for not being one of his auditors."

"Still, do you not stand in need of a little conversion?" asked Louise, with a smile which seemed like a rose in the mist.

So long as the smile lasted, Adrien looked at her; then he said,—

“Mademoiselle, for certain people who have taken the wrong way, it is better not to realise that they have been mistaken; but you could not understand me.”

A quarter of an hour later he rang at the Louarns' door.

The day was waning. Antoinette was writing and alone, except for a little child dressed in black, whose common features bespoke the precociousness of the lower class children of Paris.

When she saw Adrien, Mademoiselle de Louarn quitted her desk, and stood behind a large arm-chair, resting her beautiful arms, bare to the elbow, on the carved back of the chair. One would have said that she was intrenching herself, preparatory to doing battle, and in truth it was a battle which was about to take place; she knew it. Adrien, however, had come more decided than ever to keep the truce. A short interview with Louise had sufficed to calm and soothe his nerves. He pressed Antoinette's hand, without noticing that this hand was slow in being offered. On the milky whiteness of her arm, he saw the marks made by the oak carving, and he thought in his ardour, quick to be kindled in a young and passionate man, that his lips some day would leave similar marks on these charming arms. Indeed, this beautiful woman could count upon some fervent hours of

adoration in the future; but she was no longer adored in the fashion of a queen.

She had recently become too much of a woman not to understand this new state of Adrien's mind, and not to feel it at this moment, and, to do her justice, she regretted this aureole changed into an earthly radiation. From a pride quite to her credit, or perhaps from the love of contradiction inborn in the feminine breast, she longed to recover her crown. Yet, in declaring war on this rebellious subject, she was ignorant of the fact that he had a secret ally.

While both were silent, not wishing to communicate their impressions to each other, the little girl, intimidated by the visitor, came up close to Antoinette and clutched her dress in both hands. In addition to the terrible disgrace of her destiny, the child had the misfortune to be ugly, and this ugliness, in juxtaposition with the beauty of Antoinette, produced upon Adrien the effect of a false note. He asked,—

“For heaven's sake, what are you going to do with this little monster?”

“I would like to make a good and honest woman of her, which she cannot hope to be unless someone gives her a helping hand.”

“Is she an orphan?”

“Not yet; but according to all probability by sunrise to-morrow she will no longer have a father.”

Too young to understand, the child looked at Mademoiselle de Louarn with the bright eyes of a half-tamed animal. Adrien understood, and instinctively stepped back, trembling.

"My God!" he cried, "is it possible that this is the child of—of the man who will be executed to-morrow?"

"Be merciful," said Antoinette, in whom pity, fear, and yet another emotion gave a perfection to her beauty such as Adrien had never hitherto witnessed.

But he did not see it; he was above all revolted in his masculine justice.

He looked with a sort of terror at this unfortunate being, the offspring of the ferocious beast who would be suppressed in a few hours. He fell into an arm-chair and, with his head buried in his hands, muttered, "It is madness."

"Well," said Mademoiselle de Louarn, indifferent to the exclamation, "believe that I am mad. It is not the first time that I have been told so. But at least I have a humane heart. What would you wish, then? That this innocent child, who has been deserted by her mother, should follow her father, you know where?"

"For gracious' sake," interrupted Adrien, "answer me without circumlocution; we are not writing for a newspaper article. What are you going to do with this girl? Adopt her, perhaps."

"You forget that I am only twenty-four years old. It is 'Renée' who has taken charge of her; but every day the little girl will come to me for several hours. I shall teach her as much as possible."

"Your father consents to this?"

"He will consent to it. I have only learned this morning of 'Renée's' sublime act, which will be kept secret."

Adrien could not prevent a shrug of the shoulders, forgetting at this moment the deference due to the poor "Majesty."

"You count upon secrecy? So, I must understand that the grey hairs of this crank and your brown ones hide the same inexperience," he said. "I tell you now that the reporters will be here before sunset."

"Ah, it is they whom you fear?"

"I fear them for your sake in the same way that Abbé Esminjeaud feared the fingers of your friend Barillot for his Host. I will not have you profaned,—even touched by ridicule."

The beginning of the phrase had only moved Antoinette gently, but this word ridicule made her bound. Women tolerate with a strange facility the thought of being capable of every crime, but let it be insinuated that ridicule awaits them, and they look upon it as an unpardonable offence.

"Sublime or ridiculous, what does it matter to

you?" she said, in defiance of the looks of Adrien. "It is too soon to speak as a master!"

"Alas! later, it will be too late. Listen to me: I am neither a master nor a man without heart. I have as much compassion as you for the unfortunate, but more experience of life. Give this miserable child to me; I will put her in a safe place. She shall lack nothing; I promise it on my honour as surely as I am yours."

"No," said Antoinette; "she is not for sale. She has been confided to me; I shall keep her."

And taking the little one in her arms, she covered her with kisses.

These caresses irritated La Houssaye as an odious and supreme challenge which revolted him. Trembling with a singular emotion, he said,—

"What could you give more some day to your own children, who will not bear on their brows the stigma of crime?"

"Mignonne, little angel fallen from heaven in the mire, do not fear that I will forsake you," continued Antoinette, without replying to Adrien. "If the world censures me, if no one loves me enough to sustain me, you will at least love me, perhaps, dear innocent one."

La Houssaye rose, surprised to find an unwonted resolution in his will. Slowly he uttered these words,—

“Exaltation is a bad counsellor. I implore you to listen to me with your reason. Do you say that I speak like a master? Alas! how many times have I reproached myself for my weakness after I have left you. But the world must not pity me, instead of envying me, the day when you will take my name. Listen. Promise me that this child shall go to her adopted mother’s house, and that she shall never again cross your threshold. On my faith as an honest man, I will provide for her future.”

“I will pledge myself to nothing,” said Antoinette, looking in space as though she foresaw the approaching catastrophe.

All exaltation had left her; she had become singularly calm. Beneath this beauty, this youth, even beneath these errors of a tortured mind, one felt the Celtic rock, the basis of this nature.

On the contrary, La Houssaye was greatly moved, and trembled from head to foot; but at this moment his will clouded his passion, as in some moments his passion had clouded his judgment. It was no longer the question of the lover, but of a cautious man held in check by his conscience, to avoid the common misery for himself and for another. He was sufficiently courageous not to look at Antoinette. In his thoughts he saw Louise, she who would sacrifice for him everything in the world but honour and

duty. In this supreme struggle he was encouraged as though by the presence of a friend.

"Do you understand," he asked, "that this moment can change your life and mine? for, if you are determined never to yield a point, misery awaits us. Now, I do not wish to see my wife suffer, and, still less, to make her suffer."

"Ah! so it is all over, then, this great love?" said Antoinette.

"One might believe that you desired it. Who knows but that you are right? For in the place of one unhappy being I now see two. I had thought that you, at least, might live happily, with the happiness of a statue, adored, honoured, and adorned. But to-day I fear that the temple will become a simple house, like others, for commonplace disputes; the idol, an ordinary being who will know the bitterness of hating her own husband, without ever having known the happiness of loving him. In a word, then, I am stupefied by fear."

"And so?"

"So I beg you, I beseech you to reassure me by giving up a generous caprice. Allow me just now to protect you against yourself. Give me this little girl. It will be for her good, I assure you."

"No, I do not wish to be a luxurious doll in your hands. I have the ambition to be a woman useful to someone, to something. In yielding

to you to-day, I should deceive you as to what I intend to do in the future."

In silence and with a vague look, he strode up and down the room, feeling a sort of chilliness, in spite of the warm June sun. Not only would he have given a great deal not to be there, but still more to have been born on the other side of the globe. He felt the same disgust for life as he would have felt for a meal composed of indigestible dishes, which he was compelled to sit down and eat with a heavy stomach. Through cowardice, not through love, but in order to escape some minutes of agony, he was on the point of saying, "Do as you wish, and let destiny take its course." What checked him above all was the thought of so many such hours sure to come like the relapse of an incurable disease.

He must end it: Mademoiselle de Louarn waited, pressing the little girl in her arms as though to confirm her resolution. Very pale, La Houssaye made one last effort, the effect of which he did not anticipate on this complicated nature,—

"Promise me to grant what I am going to ask, and put your hand in mine. Why wait until the autumn to marry me?"

Perhaps Antoinette might have yielded to the lover, but to let him believe she yielded to the husband! The mere idea of this abasement

stiffened her in her pride. She placed her trembling lips on the pale cheeks of the little girl and shook her head several times. All the refusals in the world would have had less force than these silent gestures. Adrien continued,—

“The moment is a solemn one. We are neither of us children. If we are to part, it will probably be——”

“Forever,” finished Antoinette; “such I think is our fate. I feel that the adieu is in this room. Adieu, then.”

For a last time La Houssaye sought in those eyes the seduction which he knew only too well. Perhaps he wished to find it once more. But the eyelids were lowered, and the stern face hid Antoinette de Louarn’s secret.

“Adieu,” he repeated, bowing low.

And the door closed upon him.

Less than half an hour later “Renée” entered, like a whirlwind. The condemned man’s child was asleep in the arms of Antoinette, who was weeping bitter tears without restraint. “Adrien’s hour” had come, but he was no longer there to see his victory—and profit by it. Mistaking the cause of this despair, the visitor roughly questioned her young friend.

“Do not cry so much. These people do not deserve to be cried over. Would you believe that they have refused to give me this child? They

declare that I am too 'bourgeoise.' The idiots! yes, still more idiots than wicked! Come, wake up, Mignonne, for we are threatened with the courts, with the press, with everything. Come, the gutters are claiming you. To-morrow you will find blood in it,—may you not recognise it."

"Renée's" phrases produced a strange effect on Antoinette. They seemed to complete by a lugubrious farce the *dénouement* which had just broken her heart. So they dared to take away from her this unfortunate little creature, the cause of her rupture with Adrien,—even this wreckage of the disaster was to escape her. She dried her tears with a heart-rending desire to laugh at herself, and, without other protestations, she dressed the child in her modest cloak to let her return to the gutter. She even seemed to long to see her go. One single question escaped her lips,—

"Are you quite sure it is *they* and not *we* who are idiots?"

As the little girl crossed the threshold, docile and speechless in her confusion, Mademoiselle de Louarn forgot to embrace her, although the unfortunate child started on a voyage fated to be filled with storms and shame. But at this hour Antoinette had the selfishness of the wounded man, who is no longer interested in the battle. The moment had come to think of her misery.

Louarn returned for dinner, and was much surprised at his daughter's calmness, whom he had left in the morning greatly impressed by the impending execution. She made no allusion to the refusal of the court for another trial asked by the criminal, nor to his child, nor to Adrien. Seeing her absorbed and taciturn, her father tried to distract her, and spoke of Abbé Esminjeaud.

“What an orator! Were he known, the greatest pulpits of Paris would dispute for him. Unfortunately, you cannot hear him; he preaches only for men,—and for the working-men. He will probably make many converts among them.”

Suddenly Antoinette seemed greatly interested. She asked for some information respecting the hours of service, then added,—

“To-morrow morning, I will go and see him after instruction. Please prepare him for my intended visit.”

At an early hour she retired, and it was not Louarn's midnight lamp, the worker into the small hours, which was the last to be extinguished that night.

CHAPTER XIX.

AT the hour named Mademoiselle de Louarn reached the plain building of the Christian Working-Men's Home. Introduced at once into a very poor study, which served provisionally as the sacristy, she heard the vibrating voice of the priest finishing his discourse. The retreat was held in the lecture-room, which had been turned into a chapel.

When the sermon was over, there was heard a dull, grating noise,—several hundred men were kneeling. Then they commenced singing. These poor people, condemned to labour, intoned together after so many centuries of human misery the prayer, written by an unhappy king for the use of the suffering, “*Miserere!*” This plaintive melody, quite marked with an Oriental resignation, like a monotonous wail, produced a solemn impression on Antoinette. She, too, stood in need of pity; an immense need, the extent of which she could tell no one. Like Faust, disabused, desperate, she tried to cry, “*God! God! God!*” but in the depths of her soul she found only the bare sands left by a reflux; her religious devotion of days gone by had left her.

Gradually, and with a surprising rapidity, this change had been effected. The shore was yet

humid, but the beneficent wave which formerly rocked the pious Breton was breaking in the distance, and was scarcely visible in the horizon. Would it return some day as a blest tide to float the poor stranded bark?

No one, however, had told her that she must not pray, that she must not believe. Only, almost all of those who had played a part in her life for the last year ignored her faith, rejected it by a polite silence or combated it without excitement, with the silent incredulity that one accepts a child's fairy-tale. Martha, "Renée," Thomassin, many others, had talked in her presence of saving the world by science, by devotion, by sacrifice, by the harshness of the new law, by every means. But in this work of salvation, God and the Korrigans* seemed to hold the same place. At this moment, Antoinette was no longer thinking of liberating the world. It was her own heart that she wished to ease, the emptiness of which it was necessary to fill at all costs. Who would have pity on it? Perhaps Abbé Esminjeaud. To him alone she might expose her desolation without fearing a smile, or some irrevocable reply, such as Adrien had made. As these thoughts were coursing through her mind, God's servant appeared, still wearing the preacher's surplice, and Mademoiselle de

* Brittany fairies.

Louarn was embarrassed to say what she had come to say. But he, simple and smiling as he had been in the salon of Villegarde, advanced with outstretched hands.

“Dear mademoiselle, why did you come? I intended to go and see you.”

She answered,—

“I could not wait. I am drowning. I have come to beg of you to save me.”

“Poor child!” said the abbé, making her sit down. “You are swimming so far from shore, and are so badly supported. What has happened, then?”

“All abandon me, all escape from me, everything breaks beneath my hands, which are torn. If you knew! few women in all their lives have suffered as I have done for several months.”

“Alas! you are unacquainted with the sufferings of others. On the contrary, it seems to me that Providence has treated you with special favour.”

“Yes; perhaps so long as I did not realise that I had a heart. But one man brusquely awakened it. At first, for the Marquis de Villegarde I felt admiration, then, after a few hours, enthusiasm; all was changed in me. Hitherto I had been proud of my indifference, and then it suddenly seemed to me that there was a supreme glory in this weakness, in this revelation of that unknown thing,—love. I felt as though I had

wings; I soared—or rather I drifted away. How delightful! But when I displayed this metamorphosis, my hero did not even remark his conquest. He said to me, ‘You are mad!’ Ah! how right he was, the wise marquis!”

The abbé had already heard it from Adrien, so he was not surprised by this confession. He answered,—

“You are hard on yourself; harder, no doubt, than my noble friend has been. I know him. For my part, I could not reproach you for having felt some enthusiasm for a man of his worth.”

“Were you a woman, and were it a question of your pride, you would be less indulgent. Be that as it may, in this first shipwreck there was one generous hand extended to me. I repelled it at first, but afterwards accepted the test of time.”

“You were right. Adrien La Houssaye can sustain you; his hand is as loyal as yours. Let time calm the agitation of your soul, let happiness, tenderness——”

“Happiness!” cried Antoinette. “You do not know what a cursed creature I am. Every flower that I touch withers at once. I come to you as a newly-made widow of yesterday, and it cannot be said that I have even been betrothed.”

She related her rupture with Adrien. At this news, Abbé Esminjeaud could not hide his surprise. But, always quick to find some consola-

tion for desolate hearts, he said to Mademoiselle de Louarn,—

“This is infinitely to be regretted, my poor child. But you did not love him, according to what he has often confided to me; so you are to be but half-pitied.”

“*I did not love him!*” groaned Antoinette, her face buried in her hands.

Both were silent; the priest then continued in a sympathetic voice,—

“I pity you now, but all is not lost. Let me speak to him, reassure him. Besides, why did you frighten him with your ideas? I do not understand you.”

“Do you imagine that I understand myself? When I was away from this man, I felt that I was being drawn to him gradually. In his presence something like a revolt arose in me. It broke out yesterday. I wished to be loved as I was before, when he sacrificed his reason, his will, his judgment, everything for me. I was anxious still more, perhaps, not to let him see that he had changed, ruled, subdued me so quickly. Ah, our hearts are a strange complication, when they are not formed of soft wax, cast in the common mould, from whence springs the typical mother of a family! I ought not to have been born, since I am not fit for anything. And you saw how I have wished to do some good. I have been so long in quest of my ideal.

What have I gained by it? I have been deceived. I have helped unworthy beings; or those whom I wished to save have rejected my hand. And, in the meanwhile, my friends are blaming me. I am all alone now, alone in this world full of revolt and hatred, where my eyes see nothing but injustice and desperation."

"Well, my child, look higher; there will be found justice and hope. Pray that God may give you peace."

"Ah," said Antoinette; "pray: I cannot do so now."

She expected a reprimand; but the abbé smiled, as if he did not take seriously the words he had just heard.

"My dear child, for the last quarter of an hour you have prayed, and even prayed well. The wail of a soul which suffers is the most eloquent of prayers."

"Can one pray and doubt? Oh, if I could believe again that there is a happiness, a justice, a rest after this life! If you could but give me back the blind hope as powerful as the certainty which sustains you."

"My child, it is not I who have robbed you of this hope. I might tell you, go and demand it back from the malefactors who have despoiled your soul without replacing it by anything else, but I speak to you otherwise. I am a priest: I have the words of Eternal Life; 'Daughter,

have good comfort; thy faith will make thee whole.' ”

“Alas, I am neither blind nor deaf; I see only too well. Difficulties, objections, surround me.”

Abbé Esminjeaud smiled no longer; but a grave goodness, a strength, a strange sweetness shot from his eyes while he looked at this poor girl thirsting for an Ideal, for Love, for Faith. Suddenly, with a quiet gesture he pointed to the confessional which occupied one corner of the room.

“Go, my child, kneel there,” he said, almost in a whisper.

Greatly astonished, abashed, perhaps, Made-moiselle de Louarn replied,—

“I did not come to confess my faults. Do you then consider me such a great sinner?”

“You were not a great sinner, either, when your mother for the first time led you to the feet of God’s minister. At that moment you made no objections; you had faith, holy humility, the pious resolution to be good, and—you had your mother. Harken to her: she is looking at you this very moment; she speaks through my mouth. Once more she says to you: ‘Go, my beloved child, kneel; say that you feel sorry to have been naughty, promise to be better. And the voice which will answer you, not in reproach, be without fear, will be the voice of God, with

whom I am, with whom we shall be together for all eternity. Go, my dear child, kneel there.' ”

Antoinette listened, her head buried in her hands, thinking of her mother whom she had adored, remembering one morning at Villegarde when she had prayed so well because she had seen the eyes of the priest sparkle with the same divine ray which exhorted her to-day. She felt her heart melt within her, bowed down by the weight of an immense fatigue. She felt infinite compassion for herself, and she sighed aloud,—

“ My poor mother! Why did you leave me? ”

At the same time her tears commenced to flow. The abbé said nothing, for he knew that a voice more eloquent than his was speaking to her at that moment.

Suddenly, Mademoiselle de Louarn dropped her arms, overcome. As though exhausted, she rose and with tottering steps went towards the confessional.

CHAPTER XX.

ADRIEN had not left Mûrier for several days, or rather, he had only taken long, solitary promenades, sometimes on foot, sometimes on horseback, during which he had experienced this phe-

nomenon, less difficult than philosophers pretend, —that of not thinking. To tell the truth, he gleaned a pleasure in this beneficent atony, without hope. Had some one suggested a few months before that he could live after a rupture with Antoinette, he would have shaken his head in denial. Now, not only he lived, but yet he had come out of this fall broken rather than bruised. He was even humiliated by this too quick recovery, for he felt it was a sign that in reality he lacked sentiment. Saved from the shoals, he realised that a marriage with Antoinette would have been a misery for both. The shipwrecked man asked himself if he had not abandoned the craft too easily and too soon. However, he did not suspect what he had left on this poor drifting bark.

With regard to Saint Urbain the calm was still greater. “*La belle Martha*” had freed herself from trouble without either storm or thunder; at the most she had been stranded in fine weather, and there was no danger. Thomassin, thrown overboard, the charming vessel continued its course, a little inclined, as it happens after the cargo has been shifted. The Buddhist professor, much more curious to listen to, and decidedly more fashionable than Thomassin, possessed two serious defects. He was platonic, which limited his attraction as a talker, and he was a vegetarian, which limited his attraction as a guest.

In short, Martha was greatly bored in her château at Brie. Returning home for dinner a few days after they were settled, Honoré, usually so dull, brought some interesting news: Mademoiselle de Louarn had quitted Paris to pass some time with an aunt in Brittany; her brother was going to marry the daughter of a rich notary, according to report, a perfect fright.

Antoinette had gone away; that was strange, as she had pretended a week before that her father required her presence. How much more so at the moment of Fernand's marriage. With the feminine instinct for such subjects, Martha descried some mystery attaching to a rupture interesting to unravel. The following day a messenger carried to Mûrier an invitation for the same evening. "No full dress," said the note, which bore the stamp of a lotos flower; "there will be no other guest than yourself."

A year before La Houssaye would have cursed this act of courtesy on the part of his neighbour. But now he was surprised that he felt quite pleased in accepting the invitation. He arrived early, and with the first glance at her guest, Madame Montgodfroy felt assured that there was something new ahead.

"You have been more than a week at Mûrier, only half a league from us," she said; "yet you ceremoniously awaited my invitation to come to

Saint Urbain; but I imagined that you went to Paris every evening."

"How like me that is. You who know my habits, too."

"Do not resort to artifice; your habits are pretty well upset. When will you depart under the pretext of admiring the sea at Croisic, or at one of the sea-resorts in la Loire Inférieure?"

"At the same time that you take your departure for India, the holy ground of Buddhism."

"There is no one waiting for me in India, while you are waited for in Brittany."

"I would much like to know by whom?"

"Great heavens, how many mysteries! In truth, this man is even ignorant of the very name of Antoinette de Louarn."

"What! has she gone away?"

The cleverest comedian could not have played astonishment with such perfection. It was evident that Adrien had not yet been told of Antoinette's departure. However, his physiognomy did not show the consternation which he really felt at this news. Madame Montgodfroy, who watched him without losing one of his gestures, could not be deceived, and, greatly astonished, exclaimed,—

"But then—but then!"

"Then what?" asked La Houssaye, a little sharply. "You evidently imagine that Made-

moiselle de Louarn keeps me informed of her smallest doings."

He had preserved his own calm without much trouble. Yet this unexpected departure had given him a heartache, as invariably happens on the occurrence of any untoward event. After reflecting for a few seconds, Martha resumed,—

"I certainly imagined that you would inform us some day of your engagement to Antoinette."

"Well," said the young man, whom this cross-questioning annoyed, "you are mistaken, that is all."

Montgodfroy appeared with his daughter, and La Houssaye was struck with the entire change in Louise. There was no need to ask if she had been informed of "her friend's" departure, still less what she thought of it. Her figure was more erect, the strength of hope shone in her eyes. She no longer bore her love as an iron arrow-head embedded in her flesh. She seemed now to shield it, like a lamp the rays of which she wished to soften.

Even her mother, without understanding the metamorphosis, was struck by it. She said with the blended feelings of maternal pleasure and the regret of the woman who feels herself growing old,—

"Great heavens! what a grown-up daughter I have!"

Her eyes added, "What a pretty daughter."

She could not but be pleased with her work. If the fine, distinguished features of Louise resembled those of her grand-uncle, at least she had inherited from her mother the impeccable proportions and perfect lines, with the marvellous wrists and ankles worthy of a Greek statue. Adrien, too, noticed all this; but it was he alone who understood the tender veiled radiance which shone in her eyes. No one present except himself appreciated the cause of this young girl's embellishment. He suddenly remembered that Antoinette had gone away, that he was the unhappiest of men, that he had bidden adieu to love until the grave. The thought saddened him for Louise's sake. He reflected,—

“Poor little girl! She rejoices too quickly. Here she is radiant because the other has gone away. What can I do to keep her from believing in a miracle, in *her* miracle?”

To begin with, he should have appeared more unhappy. Louise watched him as she would have watched her doctor, after having escaped from a mortal illness. She had expected to find in him a sorrow more or less dissembled, and in advance she was resigned to suffer in her heart because of it. But she saw nothing of the kind. Adrien was grave and more taciturn; but the poor little one was expert in reading him, and there was an absence of that fever which causes hidden torture. Above all, without nervousness

or acrimony, he endured the presence of a young girl, who was not Antoinette.

When they were seated at table, the approaching marriage of Fernand de Louarn was discussed. The banker said,—

“I was convinced a long time ago that this fellow would end by finding a big sack of gold.”

Forgetting herself, Mademoiselle Montgodfroy said, with impetuosity,—

“So was I!”

“Indeed? And why, may I ask?” said Honoré, his big eyes expressing a strange astonishment. “Has this young man by chance asked——”

“For my hand? Oh, not quite! But he unfolded his soul to me; he has revealed me its treasures. Do you imagine that he is the only one? Indeed, papa, you have much modesty in you despite your money-bags. These gentlemen call that putting out a feeler.”

“Upon my word, you find the thing quite natural. The devil take these starving fellows, who cannot even wait, unless they are Jews, until our daughters are baptised.”

“But, papa, I am in my nineteenth year. If my family forget the fact, you cannot make others do so.”

“Whether they do or not, I beg you to continue your discouraging attitude. Putting out feelers, you know, is my business.”

“Rest easy, papa; I shall not have much difficulty in ‘persevering in my attitude.’”

Saying these words, Louise sighed. She sowed tender sighs without counting or realising them, just as a millionaire, in whose pocket there is a hole, drops louis along the wayside. And a certain not over-scrupulous young man picked up the gold of this tenderness.

The day ended gaily by a stroll through the park and a chat on the verandah. Honoré was immensely amused at the thought that Louise had snubbed the handsome Fernand, and his manner was visibly changed towards her. Treated for the first time as a young lady, Louise displayed an unsuspected wit, mingled with a playfulness and naïve grace, for which young Parisians severely brought up are distinguished.

One man alone thus far knew her as she really was,—Ferréol de Villegarde.

As for Madame Montgodfroy, she resigned herself bravely to this evolution. She reflected, like all mothers who have had great successes,—

“My daughter will never be what I was, what I will be yet for two or three years.”

God knows how many months are contained in these years of grace preceding the period of devoutness and black dresses!

La Houssaye returned to Mûrier slightly dazed, but on the whole rather contented. Such is gen-

erally the case with those who quit a surgeon after a painless operation. Between himself and Mademoiselle de Louarn all was over. She had gone away. He experienced a disagreeable vertigo, something like the hallucination left after chloroform. No doubt there would be a return of the suffering when he awoke to consciousness. But he could already analyse, which was a good sign; yet the analysis was not sufficient to explain in a way satisfactory to himself what his love for Antoinette had been. He concluded by this mental ejaculation,—

“To the devil with love.”

The lovers who spurn their god, resemble the gamblers who tear up their cards: their conversion must not be taken too seriously.

Adrien, however, felt some remorse. Had he not been a too inflexible judge for Mademoiselle de Louarn? In revolving this question in his mind, La Houssaye was forgetting to ask himself another. Could he have imagined six months before that ten days of separation would have left him calm enough to argue with his own conscience? Poor conscience! it does not often approach love except to administer the last Sacraments.

Be that as it may, Adrien knew of but one individual in the world who could reassure him,—the Abbé Esminjeaud, who had so frequently listened to his complaints. Resolved to go and

see him, he wrote to announce his visit, hinting at the object of it. But the abbé answered very briefly, and made him understand that he was in duty bound to keep silent.

“You know,” he wrote, “how you can count on my friendship. Yet under the circumstances I am forced to think that, before being your friend, I am a priest—and a confessor. For the rest, as friend, priest, and confessor, I can but beg you to listen to these words: Rest easy, let God act.”

La Houssaye was greatly astonished; he never dreamed that Antoinette was so devout. But he was overcome with lassitude; he only asked to live in peace, to drift without struggle in the current of destiny. Being unable to visit Mornière, he deemed it a good thing to go to Saint Urbain. There, it was he who was the confessor, unknown to the penitent, and it may be surmised that he had no wish to refuse her absolution.

No doubt it was by chance that he reached the Montgodfroys just one hour before dinner, and Honoré refused to allow him to depart, “la belle Martha” seconding the invitation with cordiality. Louise said nothing, but her eyelids fluttered like butterflies’ wings over a field of cornflowers, while Adrien wished to be begged for in good form. This mute appeal from the pretty eyes could not fail to be agreeable even to a man who had sent love to the devil. Besides, he wished to consign himself to his Satanic Majesty

without being able to say precisely why, except that he had a vague notion that he had failed in life.

This evening the marriage of Fernand de Louarn was a theme of much conversation, which the newspapers had announced with a heraldic synopsis of the young man's family. Montgodfroy, ignoring the fact that he was speaking in the presence of a Renuzart terribly *mésalliée*, thundered against *mésalliances*.

"They are regretted nine times out of ten."

The châtelaine retorted rather severely,—

"Add, please, for the benefit of the audience, that you are not the one who has been *mésallié*."

"Yes, certainly, my dear," said Montgodfroy. "Only," with a low bow to his wife, "I am the tenth who has nothing to regret. You will think me ridiculous, but, according to my idea, a man makes a *mésalliance* when he takes a wife out of his own rank of life. What does the audience think of it?"

"Well," said Adrien, "I wonder if social rank still exists except on silver spoons and on the panels of carriages. Nowadays, the great-grand-daughters of the knights who fought by the side of Saint Louis are becoming republicans, democrats, levellers, free-thinkers."

He stopped short, flushing up to his eyes, for what he had said in thinking of Mademoiselle de Louarn applied only too well to the mistress

of the house. Fortunately, all understood that this tirade was aimed at some one absent. Montgodfroy generously hastened to turn off the switch.

"The Louarns have invited us to the wedding. Personally, I should find it a horrid bore."

"I, also," quickly declared La Houssaye.

Louise was transported with happiness at these words. Oh, the joy that a prospective meeting with Mademoiselle de Louarn would bore Adrien! The banker said to his daughter,—

"And you, little one, say nothing. Will you blanch to see your old sweetheart swear his allegiance to another?"

"Yes," said she, "I shall blanch—with terror. What more terrible than a marriage where love counts for nothing?"

"Do not speak too hastily, unlucky child. Have you not every chance of being married for your money?"

"No, papa," said the young girl, with a simple expression. "Should I marry,—which is not at all probable,—it will be to the man who will marry me for myself, as I shall take him for himself."

With rather a brusque manner, in which some irritation might be detected, Martha gave the signal for leaving the table. Alone with her husband at the close of the evening, she asked,—

"Do you intend to throw Louise at our neighbour's head? By dint of talking of marriage

before them, you will certainly give them the idea."

"Indeed!" said Montgodfroy, his hands in his pockets, and his cheeks inflated as if he were cogitating a stroke on the Bourse. "Well, my dear, I should ask for nothing better; but they neither of them think of such a thing."

And leaving his wife thunderstruck by this overture, the perspicacious banker went to bed.

CHAPTER XXI.

HENCEFORTH a week never passed but Adrien dined at the Montgodfroys. In this household he counted two friends and one enemy, or rather one adversary. Like a worn-out hare repairing to its form, Martha was returning to her aristocratic traditions, which she counted upon brilliantly re-entering through her daughter's contracting a great marriage. Louise, heiress of Villegarde, in addition to her father's wealth, was a match fit for a duke, and the woods were full of them. The idea of selecting La Housaye for a son-in-law. What a joke!

Being unable to close her doors against the *persona grata* of the head of the family, she had found the means of surrounding him with a wall

of ice. This means consisted in bringing in on every occasion the name of Antoinette. Even though she was ignorant of the basis of the history, she divined that a history existed, or had existed. She pictured it according to her own idea for the benefit of herself and others. She made Adrien pose as a victim, showed that she pitied his unmerited rebuff, and let him see that she admired his courage, and above all that she cherished a hope in his favour. These hints, even though discreet, put Adrien on pins and needles. But how tell her that he did not care to be praised, encouraged, or pitied? He did not dare appear as a sick man too quickly cured, which would seemingly have made him a man without tact. He bowed his head, cursing these gossipers who meddled with other people's affairs. He scarcely risked a glance at Louise, who sat silent with her eyes bent on her plate, and had become almost as miserable as during the unhappiest of her days.

One evening, news was received that Fernand's *fiancée* had lost an aunt, which would restrict the wedding festivities to relations. Louise's mother regarded her neighbour with emotion,—

“Oh, how happy I am!”

Exasperated, La Houssaye asked,—

“Was the defunct an enemy of yours?”

“It is not of myself that I am thinking, ungrateful man! You yourself said that a certain

meeting would have little charm for you under such circumstances. How nervous you have become! Are you not going to travel this year?"

At the word travel, Louise's face suddenly changed, as a young olive-tree, the leaves of which are turned by the wind. La Houssaye answered,—

"No, madame; I shall remain at Mûrier, with your permission. My only trip will be to Villegarde and its forests in November."

These cold shower-baths to which Martha periodically treated him had a result easy to be guessed,—a name, which formerly to him was the sole name, grew to be distasteful. It is not only woman that is synonymous with Frailty, as Hamlet has said.

Adrien nevertheless lived calmly, if not happily; but he soon lost his tranquillity. Martha Montgodfroy could no longer hide from the world that she had a grown-up daughter, of whom she had resolved to deprive herself as speedily as possible in favour of a son-in-law. The opening of the hunting season at Saint Urbain was the occasion for a species of guests to appear unknown in this place, at least for the past several years. There were counts and marquises of the oldest nobility; not of large fortunes, perhaps, but quite disposed to become rich through the medium of the seventh Sacrament. These had been invited

by madame, but monsieur's only guests were Adrien and some sportsmen of over fifty.

Lost sight of in the midst of all these noblemen, for whom the pheasants were but a mere pretext, and who, furthermore, never dreamed of pretending to the contrary, this young bourgeois began in a way to suffer. He believed that this suffering was caused by a devoted interest in Louise, who merited something better than a hunter for a *dot*. But after each introduction he saw the heiress's look turn towards him with the same tender light.

"Well," he thought, "she will not be knocked down to the highest title, to-day. We are safe until next Sunday."

So from Sunday to Sunday the marquis's annual visit to Saint Urbain came around without any matrimonial result.

La Houssaye soon discovered that the uncle was the confidant of his grandniece, and so he might count upon one ally more. But this ally greatly embarrassed him, for he was too well informed about his (Adrien's) affair of the past.

Every morning the two friends would meet for an early ride, just as on the day that Villegarde had surprised the owner of Mûrier riding Elphin with a drapery. Ferréol, during one of their rides, referred to this circumstance naturally as an episode of ancient history. He even added,—

“Would you like to return to this same time of last year?”

Somewhat evasively, the young man replied,—

“Last year! is it possible? It seems to me it has been twelve years instead of twelve months.”

“Well, my friend, it is then as though it had been twelve years. It was a straw fire, and straw burns quickly. When you reach my age, you will realise how much fuel of this kind is wasted by mankind, even for heating the great boiler of progress. Search the ashes which have accumulated for the past months in and around you. What has become of Elphin? What has become of Thomassin? of Pierre de Louarn? of ‘Renée’? The only one who is always to be found unchangeable is the Abbé Esminjeaud. But it is not straw that he burns. You ought to do like him in a less solitary fireplace. You are ripe for marriage now.”

“Stop!” said La Houssaye; “let us talk of something else. There is more than a month to the fourteenth of November. It is she who set that day either to decide or to pronounce judgment.”

“Well,” answered Ferréol, gravely, “I conclude that you do not consider yourself quite free. Let us wait until the ashes are cool.”

Poor ashes of a love too quickly kindled! They were cooling from hour to hour. Such

are these dying firebrands which the sun extinguishes by its glaring rays.

Already certain looks of Adrien had brought the spring-tide roses to Louise's cheeks, but, fearing some illusions, she trembled with anguish as much as with hope, and Madame Montgodfroy's guests filed off unnoticed by her. Martha, however, did not lose courage, and asked her uncle to extend some invitations for Saint Hubert's day, for which preparations were being made.

The marquis was inexorable, declaring that the first house-party was arranged, and that this time they would hunt in earnest. In fact, there was gathered at the château of Villegarde, for the opening of the hunting season, an exclusive number of sportsmen keen in every respect; that is to say, they were strangers to politics, were either married or were ineligible matches, except La Houssaye. The sportswomen were all married, so needed no escorts, save Louise; and this time Adrien asked for nothing better than to be her escort.

It must be admitted, however, that this young man now was only a poor hunter, and for the most part could not have told whether the hounds were on or off the scent. This distraction did not escape Martha's or Louise's notice; the latter, far from rejoicing at the fact, was dismayed. She said to herself,—

“He is thinking of the bold rider of last year.”

At times when she thought of Antoinette's fearlessness, her desire was also to be intrepid. But at this Adrien protested even before her mother did.

“No, mademoiselle, no jumping over fences. You are not sufficiently steady in your saddle. We will ride on this side.”

Louise was reassured by this tender tyranny, and yet, after all, she was often right. The smallest incidents pertaining to the hunt re-awakened the memories of Antoinette, who apparently had disappeared from the world. What had become of her? No doubt Abbé Esminjeaud, who was often invited by the marquis, could have told him; but since the receipt of a certain letter, Adrien did not dare to question him. Besides, he carried in his own heart such a strange confession that the mere sight of the confessor intimidated him.

His nervousness became almost insupportable on the fourteenth of November, the limit fixed by Mademoiselle de Louarn herself as the date on which he was to expect his happiness or unhappiness from her hands. As there was no hunt, he remained at home all the morning, seemingly chilled to the marrow and sunk in a heavy sadness as though he were watching a dead friend. He pictured himself one year ago, alone with Antoinette in the carriage returning

from the station. He said to himself, "Supposing I had been accepted?" and, in his heart, he felt a melancholy gratitude towards her who had refused him, and she, too, at this same moment was probably thinking of this never-to-be forgotten conversation which had taken place in the forest bathed in mist.

A knock at the door roused him from his stupor. It was the postman with his mail; in it was the following letter:

"My friend, congratulate me, for I am very happy. Do you remember our conversation in the little hotel at Meaux? You wondered if there was anything that I liked with enthusiasm. That day with truth I replied to you in the negative; since then I have enjoyed several enthusiasms, to be ended by this philanthropic zeal for which you could not pardon me. You were right, my friend; it is not sufficient to love the poor and unfortunate: one must love them well, and I loved them very badly. I resembled—let us once more return to the *chasse*—a rider who would have liked to mount Elphin, admirable Elphin, without putting a bit in his mouth. At the first fence, what would have become of the horse and the rider?

"I have found the indispensable bit; it is the love of God. I have been shown that it is necessary to love Him first, and then my

neighbour, because of Him. Now I am firm, and I am going to depart for the *chasse* wearing another costume, a beautiful white guimpe, a grey gown, and a crucifix on my breast. Understand it well and tell it abroad, for it is a holy truth. I am bathed in happiness, and, in this joy, I cherish the certainty that you are no longer angry with me.

“To-morrow when you read these lines I shall have taken possession of my little novitiate’s cell. Some one whom you know would not hear to my entering sooner, saying that I must keep my word, even given to one of the world, and that until to-day I was not quite free. However, I knew well that you would have given me my freedom, and I thank God that you have done it. My poor friend, how unhappy we should have been! I forewarn you that I shall pray much that you may find a good wife, or rather that you may marry soon, for she has been found, or else I am blind. The news of your betrothal will be the last echo from a world capable of interesting me. For a wedding present you will have the blessing of

“Your sister soon, your friend always,

“ANTOINETTE.”

The breakfast bell was ringing as Adrien finished reading the letter, but he was obliged to force himself to eat. Notwithstanding that An-

toinette declared herself the happiest of women, he was choked with emotion, while one question, despite his efforts to drive it away, recurred persistently to his mind,—

“Has this woman who has just died to the world never felt love? has she never even had a regret for him who has freed her?”

This letter from a devotee, one might almost say from a dead woman, exhaled a vague perfume of tenderness. Such are the stuffs, relics of the past, which come from the Orient, and which bring in their folds the dying odour of an intoxicating scent.

“My poor Antoinette, you will be a mystery for me until the tomb,” thought Adrien, whose eyes were moist.

As soon as he could escape he ordered a horse to be saddled, and rode through the woods during the entire afternoon. Towards dinner-time Abbé Esminjeaud suddenly appeared; he seemed radiant.

“I come,” said he, “as a messenger from an absent friend whom we shall never see again; Mademoiselle de Louarn has deputed me to announce her entrance into the convent. She wishes you to share her joy, which is complete.”

There were some exclamations of astonishment, but Louise and La Houssaye did not open their lips. They even avoided looking at each other.

The next day at a very early hour Adrien sought the marquis, who was already equipped for the hunt. He said to him,—

“Do you remember the talk we had last month? ‘The time has come to light a lasting fire on the conjugal hearth.’ For some time little by little the cherished flame has been kindled; it will never be extinguished. Would you oppose me were I to try to gain the hand of your grand-niece?”

“Why should I oppose you?” answered Ferréol, in whose eyes there was a frank joy.

“Because Mademoiselle Montgodfroy might marry a grand *seigneur*. But—there is only one man in the world in whom I would place this confidence—she is good enough not to perceive my shortcomings.”

“How the devil do you know that? Not from her, I suppose?”

“Indeed, no; but through Barillot. Do you think I am crazy? Allow me then, before you send for a keeper, to relate an unknown episode of my encounter with this brave fellow.”

The story of the medallion concluded, La Houssaye added,—

“Are you willing now to serve as my ambassador?”

Ferréol replied,—

“That would be to pilfer my salary, since you don’t need one, as can be seen. However, let me

give you one piece of advice. Do not rob Louise of her belief in a miracle. You see women have never too much of the ideal."

The marquis then touched the bell, and, as the servant entered, he said,—

"Tell mademoiselle that I am waiting for her to take her coffee with me before mounting our horses."

Two minutes later a blond head appeared between the doors, looking charming in her riding-hat.

"Here I am, Ton-ton. What an idea——"

She stopped brusquely at the sight of Adrien, who had turned quite pale, for he had understood Ferréol's idea.

"If it annoys you, go and breakfast with the rest."

"Oh, no; this little *dinette* of three is very amusing."

To tell the truth, the party of three was reduced to two. The third was in his room completing his preparations, leaving his coffee to cool. He was singing aloud in a joyous voice the most beautiful of *fanfares*,—

"Place à l'aimable châtelaine
Qui seule doit régner ici,
La voici——"

Neither Louise nor Adrien had the slightest desire to sing, or indeed to eat. Villegarde, looking at them in a mirror, thought to himself,—

“How they love each other, and yet they are as gawky as a pair of village lovers! Do they intend that I shall sing all day?”

Fortunately, Louise, who turned her spoon in her fingers, let it fall to the floor. Adrien kneeled to pick it up, and, finding the place convenient, he remained there, so much the better that he had encountered a small trembling hand. A second time the spoon fell, but it remained under the table. The *fanfare* continued in the adjoining room. Not having time for long phrases, the lover essayed a short one,—

“I love you. Will you be mine?”

The response was shorter still. Suddenly the song ceased. Ferréol regarded the pair, and cried out, in a terrifying voice,—

“And this is what you call a *dinette*, you rascals?”

Adrien did not seem intimidated. He rose and without saying a word leaped to Villegarde’s neck, who embraced him rapturously. Then, quite reassured, Louise hid her burning cheeks on her uncle’s shoulder, in whose throat at this moment was something other than *fanfares*.

When he felt that his voice no longer trembled, Ferréol said,—

“My children, the rest concerns me. For the moment it is a question of mounting our horses and appearing unconcerned. I forewarn you, mademoiselle, you look too radiant. Nice be-

haviour for a well-brought up young woman! And supposing your father says no?"

"I am not afraid," answered Louise; "you are on our side. Besides, I believe in miracles."

"Ah!" said Adrien; "so do I. Particularly in the miracles of love."

Ferréol made a pitiable master of the hounds that day. Something interested him more than the hounds on the wrong scent, or the animal breaking cover: it was watching his grandniece. She galloped leisurely, her eyes lost in space, in an ecstasy. It might be said she was carried on wings instead of on the back of an old thoroughbred,—incapable, thank heaven! of taking advantage of the distractions of his rider. She dared not turn her head towards Adrien, for he, like everybody, even to the whippers-in, watched her smallest gesture. Her mother, vaguely suspecting something, followed her like a shadow.

At the end of two hours La Houssaye informed her they would return to the château without having taken the stag: a cry escaped her,—

"What a joy!"

She did not wish that any created thing should know the suffering of death on this day—a red-letter day for her in the history of the world—when her heart's desire was so complete.

Towards evening Montgodfroy appeared, coming from his office. Peeping from behind the blinds, Louise saw her uncle take possession of

him, and drag him to a mysterious corner of the park. The conversation was extraordinarily short; when the two men emerged they seemed to have grown younger. Almost immediately Louise was summoned to her mother's room, where the council met. Martha's head was bent, and she was watching the burning logs in the fireplace. Honoré said to his daughter,—

“What will you do now if I refuse?”

Louise let her clasped hands drop, and replied,—

“My dear papa, what would you do if some one told you that you had lost all your money, and you would be forced to beg the rest of your life?”

“I am going to lose my daughter; is that nothing?” sighed the brave man, whose eyes were moistened.

Louise embraced her father, and kissed her mother's cheeks, who seemed to be turned into marble. A moment ago, for the first time perhaps, her husband had made her listen to some hard truths. As the dinner hour sounded, Ferréol himself started in search of the indispensable personage, to this *dénouement*, which was short, as was appropriate to happy *dénouements*. It was agreed that the engagement should be kept secret, until Martha and her daughter should return to Saint Urbain.

The next day Mademoiselle Montgodfroy ac-

accompanied by her governess attended mass at Mornière. Her eyes were often raised to the medallion which was suspended around the neck of the Madonna; she never suspected that it was empty. A noise disturbed her meditations, Adrien was kneeling near her. Turning for the benediction, Abbé Esminjeaud saw the couple and thanked God.

The young people returned arm in arm through the narrow paths, which seemed made for the occasion. As the duenna was on their heels (she knew all, but a duenna is always a duenna), they could not speak of what filled their hearts. They consoled themselves by making plans, the *fiancée* declaring that Mûrier would greatly please her as a residence. Adrien objected,—

“We shall seem like misers who are afraid of spending money.”

“Oh, we will spend it,” affirmed Louise. “Do you remember the famous theory on the circulation of Capital?”

“Gracious heavens!” exclaimed La Hous-saye. “It is now you who are going to become a Socialist!”

“But I am one,” she replied, laughing. “I, too, find that society moves badly; the rich do not give enough. In their expenses a large slice should be cut from their luxuries and given to the poor. Indeed, it is not only our money

which we ought to give but our time as well. We should daily cross the borders which separate us from the world of suffering. We should lament over the poor less,—they feel only too keenly their miseries,—but help them more. On the mount, Jesus did not lament with them, but said, ‘Ye are happy.’ At the same time he multiplied the loaves, healed the sick, restored the blind. It is deeds, not words, which they need. That is my Social doctrine, since it is the fashion nowadays to have one. Between ourselves, my teacher is Abbé Esminjeaud.”

“I shall be your disciple,” promised Adrien. “For your doctrine is the true one.”

They talked of their home, and the lives they would lead. Gradually Louise grew agitated and somewhat anxious. It was easy to see she wished to broach an embarrassing question. Finally, no doubt deeming that her listener was well disposed, she asked,—

“Of course it is your intention that we shall make a wedding tour, is it not?”

“Certainly,” he replied. “Would you not be very glad to see a little of Italy? Or what would you say to a season at Cairo?”

She did not notice the singular smile which accompanied these words. It was neither to Rome nor to Egypt that she wished to go, and this astute man knew it well. Quite timidly she answered,—

“We will go where you wish, for my greatest pleasure will be to obey you. But if you would allow me one caprice,—do not be afraid. I will not have many.”

“Indeed, I hope you will, for through them I shall derive my greatest happiness. But tell me your first.”

“I should like to commence by the Pyrenees,” declared the young girl. “I long to see Lourdes.” She was quite astonished at the emotion with which her betrothed kissed her hand. She answered, simply,—

“If you only knew how happy I am!”

She felt her heart leap in her young breast, as though ready to fly away on never-tired wings, the wings of Love and Faith. And this dual enthusiasm could be so well read in her eyes, that for a moment the love was jealous of his immortal companion. La Houssaye found that he had not his due share in the gratitude of this young devout. He resolved that she should know, at an appropriate time, what very human miracle had brought their paths together. He promised to himself that she should see some day the famous bit of paper——

Nevertheless as they were kneeling together two months later at the base of the rock from whence sprang the holy fountain, Adrien felt his jealousy evaporate; happiness was suppress-

ing in him every other feeling. A few hours afterwards, while his young wife was uncoiling her blond hair in an adjoining room, he took out from his pocket-book this same bit of paper which brought back to him so many memories. He read it once again and pressed it to his lips, and approached a lighted candle. His hand trembled a little while destroying this doubly precious relic. But he swore to himself from this moment to carry the secret to his grave. He remembered the words of Ferréol, "Women have never too much of the Ideal!"

Some will add, "And men have never enough."

THE END.

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